

# Production and Destruction

The TEAM's *Mission Drift* charts the everyday apocalypses of American progress

BY DANIEL SACK

*North America's pre-eminence has come about because the resources of a rich yet middle-sized continent have been mined to provide a capital base that is the envy of the rest of the world. In a sense, the over-exploitation of the frontier was akin to going out in a blaze of glory.*

—Tim Flannery, *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples*

**T**HE TWO YOUNG LOVERS STARE OUT WIDE-EYED before the endless expanse of the New World. Among this nation's first settlers, they have traveled long and far, leaving everything familiar behind to reach this destination. Terrified, the girl doubles over with nausea. Her partner calls out to her over the music's soaring chords:

**JORIS:** Catalina. Look at me. LOOK AT ME.

This is happening.

**CATALINA:** It is.

**JORIS:** You are here.

**CATALINA:** I'm here. (Looking) It's beautiful.

**JORIS:** It's unbelievable. Catalina this is unbelievable.

It is a gesture that recurs again and again in *Mission Drift*, the contemporary musical by the Brooklyn-based company the TEAM (shorthand for the Theatre of the Emerging American Moment). Transfixed by the here and now, the actors repeatedly look out over the audience, dumbfounded



RACHEL CHAVKIN

The cast of the TEAM's *Mission Drift*, from left: NAME TK, NAME TK, NAME TK, NAME TK and NAME TK.

by a sublimity that dwarfs them. This first scene and all that follows are charged both with entrepreneurial promise and a concomitant awe of the massive destruction possible: virgin forests primed for clear-cutting, untrammelled mountains ripe for strip-mining, the glorious fallout from an atomic bomb test. As Tim Flannery would have it, *Mission Drift* is the performance of America "going out in a blaze of glory."

Set in contemporary Las Vegas against the expansive backdrop of 400 years of history, the musical tells the story of the U.S.'s doomed love affair with an idea of freedom inextricably linked to the freedom of capital—an affair sustained by the repeated promise of another frontier. In Vegas, time and place collapse within cavernous interiors; the Eiffel Tower rises above the courtyards of Ancient Rome while slot machines twinkle in the arrested dusk. So, too, *Mission Drift* compresses American history and the scale of a continent into a single night's epic performance. It is an epic that has finally reached its dead end.

The play follows an immortal Dutch couple, Catalina and Joris, perpetually aged 14 and suspended on the cusp of adolescence, as they traverse American history. They move westward from the New Amsterdam colony in 1624 (New York) to that birthplace of the postmodern, Las Vegas, where the American dream of another jackpot has run dry. At the same time, Joan, a present-day Las Vegas waitress recently unemployed, looks on, trying to decide whether to love or destroy the city (and nation) she calls home. Her ambivalence

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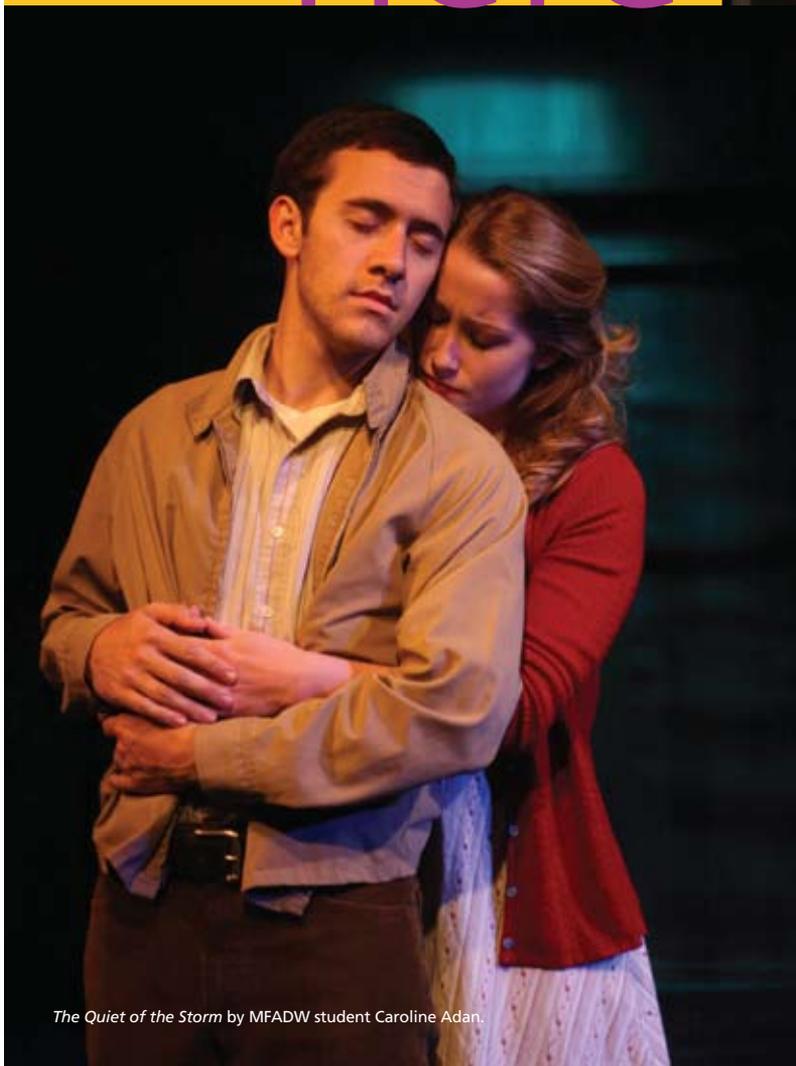
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speaks to that of countless Americans currently struggling in the wasteland of this financial crisis.

Throughout the piece, the rousing rock anthems and aching ballads of singer-songwriter Heather Christian (the force behind downtown New York band Heather Christian and the Arbornauts) seductively draw us into the naïve romantic thrill and longing at the root of our collective myth of unimpeded progress. Performing with an onstage band, Christian plays the animus of Vegas: Miss Atomic, a throwback to 1950s beauty pageants that celebrated the bomb tests on the city's outskirts. Her inimitable voice is a siren call by turns primal and alien: part languid caress, part shriek of childlike glee, all backed by the ferocity of a diva. This is a rock musical—the TEAM's first—with some damn good music.

**FOUNDED IN 2004 AND RAISED ON** the work of iconic postmodern theatre companies like the Wooster Group and Elevator Repair Service, the TEAM belongs to a recent renaissance in devised performance creation in New York (Big Art Group, Nature Theatre



RACHEL CHAVKIN

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of Oklahoma, Radiohole, etc.) and across the country. Like many of their contemporaries, the artists of the TEAM suture the body of American history with the flotsam of popular culture, scattering references to viral videos, spaghetti westerns and pulp fiction.

But theirs is an intensely human theatre as well. *Mission Drift* is a raucous affair, with the company gyrating out Elvis impersonations or representing the pioneers' westward

travel as a chaotic dance-a-thon. Where other companies may disperse an audience's attention across screens and projections, or display its characters as if in quotation marks, the TEAM funnels internet culture through the first and last mediator: the body and voice. Against the postmodern irony and cool disaffectedness of the group's many peers and predecessors—an irony that at times veers into nihilism—the TEAM is remarkable for

1/2 Horizontal AD  
7" x 4.875"



PHOTO CREDIT

Chavkin

its brave embrace of sincerity and sentimentality. Rather than comfortably demonizing these disciples of free market capitalism, *Mission Drift* forces us to empathize with them. Implicated in our affections for these people, we are heartbroken and horrified.

*Mission Drift* was informed by nearly three years of workshops, including a month-long residency in Las Vegas. The fastest-growing city in America at the turn of the millennium, Vegas is also one of those hardest hit by the collapse of the housing market and recession. The company based its operations at the University of Nevada and in one of the city's many foreclosed houses, conducting interviews and attending tours at the Atomic Testing Museum, the Neon Boneyard (a repository for the Strip's old neon signs), a failing timeshare development in South Vegas, the Grand Canyon and around the endless lights, spectacle and disaster of casino culture. In this desert city, the company found its show's symbolic heart—an epicenter of that distinctly American marriage of production and destruction that defines the frontier myth.

In 1979, the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard famously wrote in *The Postmodern Condition* that postmodernism occurred when the grand narratives of progress are no longer possible, heralding a present dislocated from past or future: the endless, nonstop crises of the 24-hour news cycle. In its original works, of which *Mission Drift* is the seventh, the TEAM triumphs over dislocation by knotting disparate strands of narrative across time and place. Ghosts of dead politicians celebrate Christmas in Kansas with aliens from Mars (*Particularly in the Heartland*, 2006) or Scarlett O'Hara wanders through the wreckage of post-Katrina New Orleans (*Architecting*, 2008). The dead

walk again—they dance and they move us with words excised from history or written anew. In works like these, by looking to the mythologies of geographic regions far from the company's home base of New York City, the TEAM seeks to fully honor its claim to stand as a Theatre of the Emerging American Moment.

#### FORMED IN, AND BY, THE SHADOWS

of 9/11 and the Bush Administration, the TEAM spent its early years, in the words of founder and artistic director Rachel Chavkin, "moving fast past the apocalypse." Theatre is by nature an apocalyptic venture; every night it abandons our everyday world in order to build another, which is irrevocably racing toward its own destruction. It proposes possible lives that may exist alongside our own, futures better or worse. The TEAM's performances stage a head-on collision with this essential fact: "In a profession in which we regularly imagine the unknown," Chavkin has written, "I constantly encounter universes for which I do not possess the genetic code. I think characters in the TEAM's plays are always confronting this problem in large and

small ways—dealing with worlds they do not recognize, levels of change they cannot fathom."

Sitting in on a rehearsal of *Mission Drift* during the unexpected and destructive snowstorm that blanketed the East this October, I ask Chavkin about this cataclysmic thread that runs through so much of the company's work. She responds, "I'm sort of obsessed with this idea of how history is turned into narrative after the fact, and the absolute opposite experience—of being in that moment of history-making, that moment of apocalypse."

#### WHILE NEARLY ALL THE FOUNDING

members of the TEAM were involved in some stage of *Mission Drift*'s development—in particular, Brian Hastert and Libby King fostered the roles of Joris and Catalina and created text from its earliest stages—many have moved on to other projects, independent and otherwise. (Chavkin, for one, regularly directs elsewhere; she recently received an Obie Award for her involvement in *Three Pianos* at New York Theatre Workshop.) Work has already begun on the TEAM's next piece,

1/3 Horizontal AD  
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tentatively titled *Town Hall*—a collaboration with Portland's Sojourn Theatre commissioned by Kansas City Repertory Theatre, for which the artists will spend time in Iowa researching and observing the caucuses, and in Kansas City learning about challenges to civic discourse and local governance.

Meanwhile, the company continues fine-tuning the *Mission Drift* machine. During a premiere run this past August as one of 2,000 performances at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, *Mission Drift* received a host of honors, including the *Scotsman's* Fringe First Award (the company's fourth), the *Herald's* Angel award, and the Edinburgh International Festival Fringe Prize for best production in the festival. U.K. critics lauded the work as "the best show I've seen at the Fringe so far" (the *Daily Telegraph*) and "a must-see" (the *Independent*), claiming that "the TEAM have slowly but surely become the artistic conscience of a younger generation" (the *Herald*). This month the performance will make its official American premiere in New York at the Connelly Theater as part of P.S. 122's COIL festival before beginning a national and international tour.



RACHEL CHAVKIN

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**IT WILL BE A HOMECOMING THREE** years in the making. A sincere faith in the potential for radical change makes the TEAM's work vital, necessary and living American theatre. *Mission Drift* captures something of the disappointment and out-

rage, the communal cry—expressed by the diverse collective of Americans who have occupied Wall Street and city centers across the country.

In *Mission Drift*, the TEAM reminds us that America is a place where, in the words of Catalina, "It sort of feels—like there's every possibility..." It is the end of the play and she is staring into the audience one final time, looking out in wonder and mourning over all that has come before: great worlds destroyed forever and great new worlds begun. She is speaking of the theatre, too, and offering us a glimpse at the last and only frontier: that forever emerging moment called "now." 

**Daniel Sack is a Five College Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Performance Studies at the University of Massachusetts and Amherst College.**

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