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PAGE 1 PAGE 6
PAGE 2 PAGE 7
PAGE 3 PAGE 8
PAGE 4 PAGE 9
PAGE 5 PAGE 10

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In our video interview playwright Kathleen Cahill discusses her new play *The Persian Quarter* playing this month at Salt Lake Acting Company.

Culture Conversations: Theater
Inside a Black Box

New, Local and Intimate Theater Experiences in Salt Lake

by Dale Thompson

We recently heard about the state of the union and the state of the state, now it's time to look at the state of theatre. Specifically small local theatre in Salt Lake City. This is because before venturing outside a person generally looks out the window to see what the weather is like and as 15 Bytes expands its coverage to include local theatre, we want to get a feel for the local conditions.

The phrase "pioneering spirit" can be a cliché, but with Salt Lake theatre it literally applies, to both the past and the present. Just a few years after entering the Salt Lake valley, and decades before the construction of the Salt Lake Temple, Mormon Pioneers made it a priority to build a small theatre, a social hall that housed the Deseret Musical and Dramatic Association. It stood from 1852 to 1857 and had the distinction of being one of the first theatres in the western United States. It was replaced in 1861 by the more elegant and imposing Salt Lake Theatre, which dominated the cityscape in the three decades before the temple was finished. That push for new innovation is alive and well. Among others today in Salt Lake, Another Language Performing Arts Company, Plan-B Theatre, and Salt Lake Acting Company are keeping the pioneering spirit of theatre alive, using different methods and exploring different themes but all agreeing on the power of intimate theatre and the importance of original work.

"For a long time there has been an underestimation here regarding the appetite for and the interest in new works," says Jerry Rapier, Producing Director of Plan-B Theatre Company, which focuses on developing Utah playwrights. He has noticed a rather large shift in audience desire around the country, driven by a hunger for regional stories by regional playwrights. Utah is part of that trend, Rapier says, pointing out that in February there will be three world premieres from theatres around the valley: *Mesa Verde* at Plan-B, *The Persian Quarter* performed by Salt Lake Acting Company, and *In* at Pioneer Theatre.

Alexandra Harbold, Artistic and Literary Associate at the Salt Lake Acting Company and director of this month's *The Persian Quarter*, agrees with this observation: "My sense of our community is that there's a hunger for a lot of different kinds of work," an attitude, she says, that fosters ground-breaking plays. The familiarity of a work can sometimes breed complacency, something many of the smaller theatres are striving to stay away from. As Harbold puts it, "When we know its stripes we expect less of it. The people I know want to push out of that."

Elizabeth Miklavic, who founded and continues to direct Another Language Performing Arts Company with her husband Jimmy, confesses that she has no idea what Utah audiences are looking for. But she also doesn't worry too much about it. "We have to let go of the idea of giving someone what they want and be true to the expression of what we want

Hints 'n' Tips
Painting Outside the Lines
Using Massing to Break Childhood Habits

by John Hughes

Most of us had our first experience with art through coloring books filled with line drawings. Next in our progression came the obvious tool of convenient necessity, the pencil (a wonderful medium, and, in the hands of a master, a true thing of beauty). Pencil drawing lends itself to working in a linear fashion but can also be used as shaded technique, which more closely mimics the concepts found in painting. From there, most of us were exposed to tempera paint and water color in elementary school and jr. high. By high school it was on to vine charcoal and if you were lucky enough, acrylics and oil. But one of the biggest hurdles when one finally learns to paint is the tendency to revert to our childhood and see the visual world as a series of objects surrounded by lines.

They say that by age four a child has developed the personality traits that will be with them for the rest of their life. If that's so, then the possibility that we look at the physical world through the prism of line drawing makes sense and becomes a sizable obstacle to overcome when learning to paint. The skill of drawing is absolutely essential to creating a successful painting and at the same time a challenge for our visual understanding. The reason is there are really very few actual lines in nature. There are no lines surrounding and delineating one object from the one next to or behind it. Lines as such, are really nothing more than artistic conventions that we all have come to know and understand as a means of expressing a visual idea. So with this in mind, it is the challenge of the painter to, while maintaining the essence of the lessons learned, look beyond the conventions of drawing transform that understanding into a new visual reality known as massing.



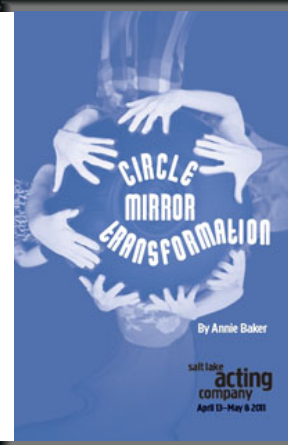
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Massing is the act of filling in large areas of the canvas to simulate the value and coloration of different parts of the scene or objects to be painted. By massing the artist gets to the abstract heart of the subject quickly and at the same time sets up visual relationships early on in the painting process. These visual relationships are the things that paintings are made of, since expression in painting is not the thing itself, but a representation of the thing, through the



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BY JOHN HUGHES

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to explore," Elizabeth says. "It's what feeds our souls in terms of having a creative life." Another Language Performing Arts prides itself on providing experimental productions for Utah audiences. "What Elizabeth and I enjoy experiencing and watching in the arts doesn't always happen in the arts," Jimmy says, and so they created a company that could embrace their own aesthetic. Since the company's inception in 1985 it has been difficult to find an audience for their work. Elizabeth attributes this to the fact that she and Jimmy are consistently ahead of their time. As an example she explains their early desire to use the internet as more than a marketing tool; they wanted to use it as a venue. This was around 1995 before it was commonplace to watch everything from the latest blockbuster hit to an eclectic mix of YouTube videos on your computer.

This February the desire for new work will not go unsatisfied. Another Language is putting on *Duel*Ality*, a telematic cinema performance created and performed by Elizabeth and Jimmy Miklavic. "Telematic describes information out there that can be shared and manipulated by several people so that it changes in some manner," Elizabeth explains. "What we're doing in *Duel*Ality* is we're creating content that is being produced live, creating a hybrid of cinema and theatre." People will be able to watch *Duel*Ality* online, extending the audience beyond the confines of the theatre. It will be streamed by the University of Utah Second Life Island and it is also accessible through the company's website. The work focuses on the interactions between the two main characters *Duel* and *Ality*, and examines their relationships with technology. On the flip side it explores the human side of technology, thus proving the dual nature of something that is often seen as having only one dimension.

Plan-B is presenting *Mesa Verde*, by resident playwright Matthew Ivan Bennett. The story follows two sisters who are able to mend their relationship when one of them falls ill. The illness allows them to finally air their feelings about their mother's death. "It's what happens when potentially faced with a terminal illness which is something almost everyone faces," Rapier says. He explains this is Bennett's most personal piece to date. "It's not a dramatization of his own experience but inspired by a time in his life when his partner was diagnosed with ovarian cancer."

Salt Lake Acting Company is performing *The Persian Quarter* by Kathleen Cahill, which examines America's relationship with Iran through the eyes of two women caught in the Iranian hostage crisis of 1980. One is a hostage, the other a captor. Fast forward thirty years and their daughters have a chance meeting at Columbia University when Iranian President Ahmadinejad visits the United States. Harbold explains this piece is unique for its humor and the way it incorporates poetry by the Persian poet Rumi. "I think Kathleen's play sends you out with poetry buzzing in your head. Poetry has a way of contending with politics. I don't think it's the alienation of Iran and America that you walk away with because Rumi gives us a different way of looking at foreign relationships," Harbold says.

Local audiences will have the chance to experience each of these pieces in intimate, black-box settings, something that might be dictated by audience size but which is embraced as a benefit by all three companies.

When Rose Wagner's Studio Theatre was created, Plan-B was asked to anchor the space. "We offer a very intimate, very connected theatrical experience. The small space is part of what makes that possible," Rapier says. He also offered this analogy on small theatres compared to larger ones: "It's like having an intimate gathering with close friends versus going to a large party where you don't know anybody."

Harbold credits the size of Salt Lake Acting Company with its ability to focus on ideas rather than spectacle. The environment also fosters substantial roles for women. "You get to do really muscular work because it's a smaller theatre," Harbold says.

Another Language will be performing at the black box theatre on the University of Utah campus, a place appropriate for what Elizabeth describes as their "adventurous audience." "We would love to be at a venue the size of Kingsbury Hall but it's not entirely realistic. I remind myself that when Phillip Glass started he only had eight people in his audience and now he packs the house."

The pioneering spirit that permeated Salt Lake's first theatre in 1852 appears to be alive and well. But there is more to it than that. It has changed shape to include new technologies and there is a niche for a range of performances with an overarching need to foster innovation. Through local Salt Lake theatre both actors and audiences are on a journey with an intriguing future.

*Duel*Ality*, a Telematic Cinema Performance by Another Language Performing Arts Company, is at the VisLab Black Box at the University of Utah Intermountain Networking and Scientific Computation Center, 155 South 1452 East Salt Lake City. February 25-27 and March 4-6. Visit their [website](#) for info and tickets.

use of pigment.

It is important to remember that no matter how well a passage is painted by itself it will always fail if it is not painted correctly in relation to the other passages in the painting. It's the big picture that counts regardless of how well the individual parts may look. One advantage that massing has over other procedures is that it frees up the artist to be more expressive in the application of paint and thereby gain better control of edges as well as a certain paint quality. Once these large initial masses are established the artist can then go on to modeling the forms by applying the paint in a more painterly fashion. Along with all of the other benefits mentioned massing has the added benefit of filling in the canvas with an under-painting that is conducive to what will come next. It also produces a surface that is favorable to the application of subsequent layers and at the same time covers those pesky little pieces of white canvas that can poke through a finished piece, sometimes causing the final look of the painting to seem unfinished.

Certainly, a massing approach is not the only method to use when starting a painting, but it is a good way to proceed in many instances. As you grow artistically, it is a good idea to experiment with various beginnings from impressionistic starts, complementary underpaintings, to a direct approach with no preliminary structure at all, just to name a few. You will find that through experimentation that certain scenes will call for different approaches and that some are more suited to particular subjects. In a future article I will try to cover some of these other approaches, until then, enjoy massing.

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EXTENDED CONTENT

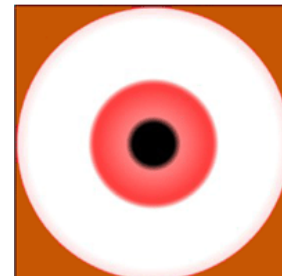
Coming up in the blog this month:

Be sure to check in frequently at www.15bytes.com as we provide daily arts content in our blog. This month you can expect to find the following posts and more:

- A review of *Chuck Close: A Portrait in Progress*, screening at the Salt Lake Art Center.
- A musical performance to coincide with Chris Dunker's exhibit at House Gallery.
- Follow-up articles on the Artist Couples featured on [page 5](#).
- Updates on legislative battles that will impact the arts.
- A review of Kathleen Cahill's *The Persian Quarter* at Salt Lake Acting Company.
- A review of Matthew Ivan Bennett's *Mesa Verde* at Plan B Theatre.
- A review of Another Lanugage Performing Arts Company's *Duel*Ality*.



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