

Theater with a Mission opens window on history

Amanda Sieradzki | Council on Culture & Arts

Theater with a Mission artistic director Ben Gunter firmly believes in a thespian's ability to open up dialogue around society's most pressing topics. As a native Tallahasseean, he's constantly inspired by Florida's medley of cultural influences that encompass Hispanic, African, and American Indian heritage and backgrounds.

"Botanists talk about Tallahassee as being ideally subtropical as we get animals and plants that grow here because the climate mixes," says Gunter. "I think the culture mixes right here, too."

With Florida approaching its 200th anniversary of statehood in 1819, Gunter sees the coming year as a prime time to build a bridge for audiences to the past, which for him, all starts with a stage. Theater with a Mission began in close affiliation with Mission San Luis and it has experienced tremendous growth in the past decade while giving multicultural performances around Florida and Georgia.

"I think one of the great gifts of being able to work on plays that come from our past is the perspective that they give us," says Gunter, who started Theater with a Mission in 2008 as a way of combining his training in all aspects of theater with his love of Florida's Spanish history. "A historical work can give you a window for seeing the present and envisioning the future more clearly."

In tandem with his team of actors and collaborators, Gunter adapts plays written when Florida belonged to the Spanish empire and translates them into contemporary English, shortening them to make them easy to pack up and transport. Gunter describes how the company functions as stock theater companies did hundreds of years ago during William Shakespeare's and Miguel de Cervantes' time: everyone is a volunteer and lends their talents "for the love of it."

In fact, it's Shakespeare's and Cervantes' who are thrown in the center ring of the company's upcoming Loco for Love Festival, which will take place Thursday to Sunday at Railroad Square. The festival will feature excerpts from golden age plays and lecture demonstrations in dining, dueling, dancing, and drama from the 15th century.

"[The festival] started in 2016 when we realized that the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare and Cervantes deaths were with us," explains Gunter. "Two great authors died on the same day, and we found there was one character who connected them both, so we put them in the wrestling ring to have them compete for the title of world champion storyteller. We thought it was a great way for people to wrestle with great ideas."

Grappling between his own dueling hats of playwright, translator, and actor, Gunter first fell in love with golden age Spain in his Spanish language classes at Leon High School. Every Friday the



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IF YOU GO

What: Loco for Love Festival

When: Thursday through Sunday

Where: Railroad Square Art Park, 567 Industrial Drive

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information please visit <http://www.theaterwithamission.com/>.

class would celebrate music and theater works of the past by putting the plays on their feet.

One week, Gunter became totally engrossed with "Don Juan Tenorio," a play by José Zorilla, which set him on his path toward studying Spanish playwrights in college. At Florida State University, he pored over the meters, rhyme schemes, and highly crafted symbolism of golden age Spanish works—often giving them legs and putting them in action.

"I think that's the smart way to explore dramatic texts," says Gunter. "They weren't written to be read in an armchair. They were written to be read on people's bodies."

Gunter eventually earned his Ph.D. in dramaturgy, the study of theater composition, and continues to be enchanted by the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy that are hallmarks of Spanish era plays. Gunter has attended numer-



Theater with a Mission presents historical dramas for modern day audiences. BEN GUNTER AND LANNY THOMAS

ous festivals for golden age plays to see these works performed in Spanish by some of the world's leading companies.

When it comes to the creative reconstruction of a play from the past, Gunter extensively researches the nuances of a story as he begins translating. Many works that feature five to seven actors will be carefully shrunk to fit a smaller cast, presenting many interesting twists and turns.

Any given work is toured and shown in multiple venues—indoors, outdoors, in parks, church social halls or theaters—which stretches and changes how it is presented, and over the course of

three to five years, it begins to take shape through multiple iterations.

"Bit by bit we started to learn how the play works in detail," says Gunter. "Every time we learn more about the play. It's a piece of theater that's alive. It's still responding."

The most important piece takes place after the performance, however, where the company solicits audience feedback. Gunter loves when an audience member finds a real, visceral connection to a character that lived another lifetime ago.

He believes this is the ultimate power of the Loco for Love Festival, which is free and family friendly and gives audiences a closer look at how people used to dance, eat, fight, and love one another through hands-on, theatrical experiences.

"Theater is the one playground where we allow ourselves to rebuild the world that we live in, and I think that is socially, artistically and spiritually valuable," says Gunter. "Having an idea of what your art form can accomplish can sustain you and help you to keep growing through the times that are lean. It's that contact between an actor and audience where we are building something in our imaginations together that can change the realities that we're in."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).