

the eye

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STATE OF THE STAGE

THE GREAT WHITE WAY
vs. REGIONAL THEATER

FEELING DIRTY AT THE
MUSEUM OF SEX

IN LINE WITH AMERICA'S
NEXT TOP MODELS

THE OTHER COLUMBIA BANDS

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STATE OF THE STAGE 07

A backstage look at New York’s role in the American theater.

By Laura Hedli

Cover photo by Daniella Zalcmán

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

When I read the *Sweet Valley High* books as a pre-teen, I always identified more with Elizabeth Wakefield than with Jessica. This isn’t surprising, probably, considering the easy binary “Francine Pascal” drew between the two characters. Though the girls were twins, Elizabeth was intellectual because she worked at the school newspaper, and Jessica was athletic because she played for the basketball team. Of course, Jessica was also kind of a bitch (read: awesome), while Elizabeth was soft-spoken (boring!), so I always secretly thought of myself as a Wakefield hybrid.

Now, though, I’m not sure I can find it in myself to identify with either one. Random House is re-releasing the *Sweet Valley High* books 25 years after the series’ inception—with a few key changes. A press release outlined these subtleties: Elizabeth’s anonymous gossip column is now an anonymous blog, and the twins drive a red Jeep Wrangler instead of a red Fiat. Fair enough on both counts, though I’m a little perplexed by the latter: are Wranglers really our generation’s definition of “cool”? Shouldn’t they be fighting over who gets the keys to the Prius instead?

In 1983, the press release explains, “the twins wore a ‘perfect size 6.’ The twins are now a ‘perfect size 4.’” As Feministing, Gawker, and numerous other outlets have already expressed: uh, *what?* Time was, YA books were the solace for normal-sized girls (and boys!) sick of seeing perfect bodies on TV. In addition to the Wakefield twins, whose size-6 frames weren’t exactly zaftig but weren’t outrageous either, we had Anastasia Krupnik, Alice McKinley, and Meg Murry—protagonists whose misadventures were more important than their dress sizes, which were simply left unmentioned (or, occasionally, moaned over).

Of course, Sweet Valley, Calif., was never a place I turned to for verisimilitude. This, after all, was the series that featured the twins falling in love with a couple of harlequin dolls in a magical alternative fairy-land (featuring random-ass monsters called bludrats!) in a special-edition paperback, *The Magic Christmas*,

that I read probably four times. This was also the series that spawned a companion TV show with the most insulting theme song ever. It features the lyrics, “One always calls out to you / The other’s shy and quiet. / Could there be two different girls who / Look the same?” Why yes, there *could* be two different girls who look the same. They are twins.

And to some extent, I think I understand Random House’s choice: they’re streamlining the series’ image, featuring a hot young soap star on the covers instead of hopelessly dated illustrations. And if the *Sweet Valley High* re-release can hope to compete with the racier, shallower *Gossip Girl* and its ilk—Cecily von Ziegesar makes sure her reader knows Serena van der Woodsen is 5’7” and Blair Waldorf is 5’4”. Both, of course, are slim—it makes sense that Random House would want its heroines to physically resemble their Upper East Side counterparts. The point could be made, as well, that an ’80s size 6 has similar measurements to a 2008 size 4. Women’s clothing sizes have grown in the last 25 years to accommodate our widening national figure. What really perplexes me about the change in the Wakefields’ waistlines is that it’s being so prominently advertised. Not only is the dress-size downgrade on the press release, it’s ranked first. Random House really *wants* you to know about this. I think if I were to make a similar change, I might just slip it in unnoticed, so as to avoid any brouhaha over adolescents’ vulnerability to eating disorders, etc.

Then, of course, I remember that no publicity is bad publicity. Even if it’s negatively framed, Random House’s move has inspired countless blog posts, e-mails, and, you know, letters from the editor. And suddenly the press release seems less careless and more shameless. If I should have the occasion anytime soon to buy a book for a 13-year-old girl, I think I’ll stick to *Gossip Girl*. At least it doesn’t make any pretenses about its own trashiness.

—Alexandria Symonds

Split Second

dena yago interviews nonny de la peña and peggy weil

INTERVIEW BY DENA YAGO
PHOTO COURTESY OF GAMEOGRE

SECOND LIFE, LAUNCHED by Linden Research Inc., is fast becoming the new virtual sensation. As a 3-D downloadable client program that allows its “residents” to interact with one another through avatars, or virtual representations, sometimes from thousands of miles away, “the world” is no longer limited to gaming or chats. Second Life allows users to create virtual stores and markets where items are bartered, and with more and more technological advances, it even has educational purposes. That’s the idea behind *Gone Gitmo*, a virtual representation of Guantánamo Bay and the habeas corpus abuses that occur there. Nonny de la Peña, director and producer, and Peggy Weil, of the University of Southern California, launched the program on Second Life as a companion piece to Peña’s 2004 documentary *Unconstitutional*. Dena Yago spoke with Peña and Weil about the opportunities for online education and interaction, and the ways in which virtual realities can shape our physical one.

What was the motivation to make an interactive education center on Second Life, particularly for Guantánamo Bay?

NONNY DE LA PEÑA: In 2003, when I was working on the documentary about civil liberties issues post-9/11, *Unconstitutional*, there were few stories in the American press about the prison. I had a good friend who would regularly call up reporters at NPR and say, “Hey, I really liked that story about Guantánamo Bay today.” The reporter would reply, “What story?” And he would shout back, “Exactly!” It was the kind of phone call I wanted to make to everyone in the nation. Instead, I dialed my good friend and creative collaborator Peggy Weil. There was this grant I just found that I was thinking we ought to apply for.

PEGGY WEIL: I start to probe. I know what is wrong with Guantánamo, but there is so much that’s wrong—where do we start? I asked her: “What is the fundamental concept you’d like to get across?” Nonny’s answer was immediate: “Habeas corpus. Our nation is denying the basic right of habeas corpus to detainees.” I asked her to drop any ideas of using the computer and envision how it would work. She told me that she’d love to have a kit to give to teachers that would let kids inhabit a prison cell and feel what it is like to be stripped of their habeas corpus rights. Build the prison, inhabit it, and then, tear it down. ... Then eureka! I’ve got it: a virtual Guantánamo! We can build it in Second Life! We can build an experiential, virtual Guantánamo prison which students, whole classrooms, people from around the world, can visit. “And they can tear it down!” Nonny said.



Nonny de la Peña and Peggy Weil created a virtual version of Guantánamo Bay on Second Life, a web platform in which avatars like this buxom young woman can interact with each other.

Why did Second Life seem like the best vehicle for this project, and not other interactive media sources?

WEIL: An online virtual environment allowed us to make an otherwise inaccessible place accessible. We chose Second Life in particular because it already has a thriving community dedicated to non-profit causes.

Second Life is usually used to sell virtual “land” for shops or gaming centers. What do you think that the implications are of widening this program for education and international dialogues?

WEIL: Using a real estate model [selling land for “Linden dollars”] provided an income stream, but I wouldn’t characterize Second Life as merely a real estate experiment. I believe Second Life was inspired by sci-fi visions (Vernor Vigne and William Gibson come to mind) of the metaverse and cyberspace, which encompass the full spectrum of human endeavors. As in much of media history, media, gambling, and porn were the first to exploit the territory, but just about everything else has followed.

DE LA PEÑA: For example, every Friday morning, non-profit organizations from across the globe come together in Second Life at Non-Profit Commons to share ideas and discuss ways of building community. At an event a couple of weeks ago, 86 individuals attended from different organizations around the world.

What do you think that the next step is for this form of avatar-based interactive media? What is going to go beyond Second Life?

DE LA PEÑA: I believe that everything will be 3-D in the future and there are baby steps being taken toward that end. For example, recently Linden Labs, IBM, and others agreed to try to unify avatar code so that avatars can cross platforms. It would mean that avatars won’t be restricted to Second Life or any other world, which would help institute a 3-D environment in a similar way that the 2-D World Wide Web exists today.

How would you describe the difference between gaming-based programs like World of Warcraft and Second Life?

WEIL: Second Life, unlike a game, is not characterized by an accepted set of rules or behavior leading to one favored outcome. Instead, it is an open-ended base or environment with many different user-defined communities, each with its own set of objectives. While games have enormous potential for education and social change (and there are game environments within Second Life), non-gaming communities may have less barrier to entry and allow a more contemplative and exploratory experience.

Will there be a point where the educational resources in Second Life have reached their capacity? Is there a limit, other than physical server space, to how far the opportunities in Second Life can expand?

WEIL: I wouldn’t limit this question to Second Life in particular, or to server space in general. There’s a direct sense that RL (real life) will continue to bleed into VL (virtual life), and that the overlap between local, physical community will overlap with virtual communities of interest with huge potential to affect the way we communicate, govern, and learn. \\\

The Columbia Records

striking a chord with three undergrad bands

BY MARTHA TUREWICZ

PHOTO BY MOLLY CROSSIN

From mandolins to magic, musical groups on campus are finding inspiration in some interesting places. While one particular group likely comes to mind when thinking of Columbia bands, there's a fair amount of talented music makers currently here on campus. They may represent disparate genres, but each of their approaches to music is similarly the result of their band members' extraordinary eclectic tastes. *The Eye* takes a look at three of these Columbia-based bands, Field Diver—the Kitchen Cabinet, and Wizards of the Coast. Play on.

Playing the Field

Field Diver is an outfit whose lineup currently includes Mike McKeever, CC '11, (vocals and guitar), Jonathan Schaller, SEAS '11 (bass), Eddie Kang, CC '11, (flute and keyboards), Kyle Sullivan CC '11 (synthesizer and “programming electronics”), and Colin Ramsey (who is enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music, percussion).

They grouped together out of a desire to “write music to combine our influences and to have fun,” McKeever says. After forming last semester, they spent a few months rehearsing and debuted at Havana Central this past February.

“We use guitar, bass, and drums like a normal rock group, but we also add strings, horns, and electronics to our sound,” McKeever says.

Citing Radiohead, Sigur Ros, and Aphex Twin as inspirations, as well as noting the influence of their own classical and jazz backgrounds, Field Diver members describe their music as “alternative rock with experimental leanings.”

This aesthetic is reflected in the name, which they chose because they believe it represents both the range of musical influences they draw upon as well as the unique spin they have put on these influences.

“‘Field’ suggests an open expanse and ‘diver’ relates to ideas of exploration,” McKeever explains.

...And the Kitchen Sink, too

The Kitchen Cabinet's band name is attributed to Mike Molina, CC '10, who references Abraham Lincoln's advisory committee.

“If you remember your U.S. History, you'll get the reference. I guess it's appropriately nerdy for a Columbia band. We've been doing a bit of a history shtick in general, with our flyers and T-shirts, but I don't think we get overly gimmicky. I mean, we're not writing songs about dead presidents or Boss Tweed. At least, not yet,” Ashraya Gupta, CC '09, says.

The Kitchen Cabinet is a folk band composed of Molina (banjo, guitar, occasionally Casiotone) and Gupta (guitar), as well as Rob Stenson, CC '10 (drums), Anna Couturier, CC '10 (guitar, mandolin, lap steel), and Cindy Gooden CC '10 (guitar).

As for the genre with which the Kitchen Cabinet identifies, Molina finds the Bwog-appointed appellation of “twee folk” “kind of adorable” and rather fitting given that they're mostly acoustic, featuring instruments like the banjo and mandolin.

All of the members sing, but, at least according to Gupta, the girls “kinda dominate lead vocals.”

Despite this instrumental composition, Molina says they mostly play pop songs. And like Field Diver, they draw upon a range of influences.

“We all listen to different kinds of stuff. Anna grew up playing folk festivals and jams. Originally, I really wanted our band to sound like Fleetwood Mac. Rob agreed with me. ... I'm not sure that it happened, though. Mike writes little finger-picky ballads. Cindy's a jazz bassist and really into Guided By Voices,” Gupta says.

Their confluence of styles has served them well, as they've been steadily booking gigs. After forming the group for last semester's Beta Jam, they have since performed at the Alphabet Lounge, played two shows at ADP, tied for the win at the ESC Battle of the Bands, and are scheduled to perform at Postcrypt Coffeehouse, among other “tour” dates.

Musical Magic

The Wizards of the Coast, Jacob Brunner, CC '09, Sam Rosenthal CC '09, Justin Goncalves, CC '09, Parker Fishel, CC '09, and Alex Silva, CC '10, certainly have put their magic to work when it comes to securing practice space. Over the last two weeks of winter break, they converted their suite into a recording studio, a resourcefulness that extended to the bathroom, where the location of a microphone in the shower elicited a complaint from one visitor. Now, they practice in their suite, starting around 8:30 p.m. and usually stopping when their RA breaks it up with noise complaints “around 11.”

Their cleverness is put to work not just in this capacity but is noticeable when looking at the group's name and self-appointed musical categorizations. On their MySpace page, they describe themselves as “psychedelic/metal/progressive.” In addition to these categories, they offer the term “drug pop,” “Harold and Kumar go to Ganondorf's castle,” and, as Fishel puts it, “spacey kids with too-big record collections.”

While they've only performed officially at Beta Jam this past January, they have a number of upcoming shows, including a show

If you can't stand the heat...

(l-r) Michael Molina, Cindy Gooden, Anna Couturier, Ashraya Gupta, and Rob Stenson make up the “appropriately nerdy” Kitchen Cabinet.

during Days on Campus, one at Sullivan Hall, another at WBAR BQ, and another at Piano's.

And though this is a sizeable lineup, Goncalves notes further successes have been impeded by the fact that “we just finished mixing the demos a couple of weeks ago, so we didn't really have much to show booking dudes.”

As for the Wizards' influences, they cite weed, metal, and *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and attribute their name to *Magic: The Gathering*. Silva tempers the overall metal leaning of the group with his preference for jazz and a general “softer aesthetic sensibility.”

As Goncalves notes, the music-creating process is “very collaborative,” usually involving some sort of compromise. This attention to balance exhibits a dedication to the enterprise that shouldn't be overshadowed by the band's playful humor.

Brunner says, “We do take the music seriously.”



Irreverence and the Ivy League

bishop allen and the cambridge aesthetic

BY ZACH DYER

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUBREY EDWARDS

IVY LEAGUE SCHOOLS BOAST some of the most intelligent, motivated, and creative students of every generation. So it is no surprise that the schools also kindle some of the most incredible, unique musical talents as well. Columbia's graduates include Art Garfunkel, Lauryn Hill, and Alicia Keys while Harvard has produced cellist Yo-Yo Ma and Joshua Redman. But what exactly is it about the schools that attract and develop these musical talents? While Vampire Weekend may be the greatest Ivy League indie rock success to date, Bishop Allen, a Harvard-bred indie rock band that shares their affinity for effete lyrics, is quickly growing in popularity.

The two band members, Justin Rice and Christian Rudder, met as DJs for the Record Hospital, Harvard's underground rock radio station. Since graduating Harvard in '99 and '98 respectively, they have played in a number of different bands together including their first band, The Pissed Officers. After college, they knew they wanted to be musicians, and so they moved to Brooklyn and formed the band that is now known as Bishop Allen.

Just as Vampire Weekend is intricately tied to New York and Columbia, Bishop Allen still holds on to its roots in Cambridge and Harvard. Justin Rice claims it was the Cambridge music scene that first sparked their interest in being musicians. "Around Cambridge," Rice says, "there was all kinds of crazy music happening that was mostly kind of punk rock, but was definitely intellectual too." Rice cites Harvard's Record Hospital as "informing the kind of music that we [Rice and Rudder] make" and also laying the "common foundations to be able to work together." It is the underground, indie nature of all the Cambridge music that influences the voice in Rice and Rudder's music, even as they work in Brooklyn.

But it wasn't just the music scene in Cambridge that had a huge effect on the members of the band, but the culture of the city itself. The greatest influence the city had on them was in the way they approach the world. Rice mentions "parties in people's basements ... art galleries in weird dorm rooms" and other "pointless shenanigans" that were part of the Cambridge collegiate

"I HAVE SOME SORT OF SEED PLANTED IN
THAT PURE SOIL THAT GROWS THE JOY WE
TRY TO BRING TO THE MUSIC WE PLAY."

culture. "I remember having vegan Easter parties every Sunday that had nothing to do with religion," Rice explained in reference to the Cambridge scene of the early 2000s. This irreverence finds its way into the band's music, as they mix both pop and power-punk with clever lyrical turns.

In this spirit, of approaching the world with unique perspective, Rice and Rudder also find their place as musicians in the present. To illustrate, the band claims no place or genre classification in the music industry. According to Rice, "I do it because I have some sort of seed planted in that pure soil that grows the joy we try to bring to the music we play." And listening to the band's most recent full-length album, *The Broken String*, that joy is apparent. Songs such as "Like Castanets" and "Click, Click, Click, Click" exhibit the band's simple, fun, and blissful pop aesthetic to which they claim to aspire.



The current incarnation of Bishop Allen, featuring (l-r) Justin Rice, Darbie Nowatka, Cully Symington, and Christian Rudder.

The band's ideals are not only expressed through their actual music but also in the way in which they function in the music scene. "We always try to do things outside of the industry standard," Rice says. "That comes from the way that we learned how to appreciate music. ... 'We don't want to be doing things the way every band always does it, so we're always trying to find something fucked up to do that keeps things interesting and different.'" In the spirit of the low-fi, low budget atmosphere of their collegiate days, Rice says, "We were in one band, and we would play 17 songs in seven minutes and we would plug into a darkroom timer, and when the timer stopped the amps would shut off—it would shut off the power and we were done." Through these moments, ideals and music fuse to create a new and different kind of pop band.

If you are wondering what kind of "fucked up" things the mellow indie band from Cambridge could possibly be doing, look no further than the band's "EP project." In 2006, drawing on their experiences as undergrads, Bishop Allen released a four-song EP every month. Each EP was titled for the month in which it was released. They successfully completed the project in December, having recorded and produced 44 original songs and an EP of live recordings in one year.

But a series of EP's isn't enough for a band whose very nature is to be subversive and different. Right now, aside from writing new songs and recovering from their tour, the band is working on another

unique project: writing a musical.

Aside from that, the band has repeatedly collaborated with director and screenwriter Andrew Bujalski, who shares their interest in the pursuit of the atypical. Both Rice and Rudder appear in Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation*. The films prominently feature the band's music as well. Rice does not contain his enthusiasm for the films, which are at least partially influenced by a shared Harvard camaraderie.

Ultimately, Bishop Allen is always looking for something new and slightly seditious. It is the culture of Cambridge that made Rice and Rudder the people they are—it gave them the capability to do things for fun and irreverence, which defines the band and translates to their lyrics. Rice and Rudder have achieved in their music what they learned to do at Harvard: to embrace the originality of unfettered thought. "I can remember on Columbus Day," Rice says as he recounts his favorite memory of Harvard, "everyone got together and made these parking tickets that looked just like 'The City of Cambridge' parking tickets, but they added a little extra check box that said 'parked on stolen lands,' and the fine was some irreparable damage. And we made all of these and people put them on thousands and thousands of cars and there was no point to it. It wasn't like protest, it was just kind of funny and it was like that sort of slightly punk-rock protest, but mostly just weird, pointless, shenanigans that define the culture that we learned to play music in." ∞



Funny Games stars (l-r) Naomi Watts, Michael Pitt, and Brady Corbet.

The Filmgoer As Sadist

michael haneke takes “gore-porn” to a new level

BY ALEX GREER

PHOTO COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES

YOU’LL HATE THIS MOVIE. You *should* hate this movie. It will make you feel sick with yourself, with everybody involved in its production, and with society in general. Which is why it’s absolutely brilliant.

I took my mother to the opening night screening—it actually made her cry. These weren’t tears of sadness, or even tears of relief (director Michael Haneke would never let you have such a pleasurable moment of release), but tears of unfiltered anxiety. It’s fitting to note that she teared up only after the movie was over: *Funny Games* is like food poisoning—you don’t realize just how nauseous it makes you until you’ve fully ingested it. And that’s because, like tainted food, it looks just fine on the surface. The poison lies subtly within.

The meat of the film is in the same vein as *Saw*, *Hostel*, *House of Wax*, and any other gore-porn thrill-fest that’s dominated the box office over the past decade: Michael Pitt and Brady Corbet play two semi-nameless “gentlemen,” clad in monochromatic, *Clockwork Orange*-esque attire who are slowly but surely terrorizing an unspecified Northeastern vacation spot. They go through each upper-middle-class summerhouse one by one, taking each family hostage and torturing them, both physically and mentally, before they finally kill them, which almost always seems like an afterthought. It’s the chilling demeanor in their complete detachment from humanity that

resonates most intensely after the lights come up.

Tim Roth, Naomi Watts, and Devon Gearhart make up the picture-perfect family with whom we are intended to sympathize, but the stellar performances by this reputable cast are nearly inconsequential—the players are simply pawns on Haneke’s filmic chessboard. In this chess game, the camera functions as the merciless queen, the element that takes a tried-and-true scenario and garners a completely novel and entirely progressive reaction to a twisted subject matter.

Quite simply, Haneke points his camera in a direction relatively unfamiliar to the genre: away from the action. What would you rather see: a ten year-old getting shot in the face or Michael Pitt getting snacks from the fridge? Now, any rational person in the real world would balk at such a question—who in the hell would want to witness a child murdered? Answer: the filmgoer.

Movies aren’t really *real*, so what’s the big deal? The cinema presents us with voyeuristic opportunism with seemingly no real-world consequences—they’re just images, they aren’t real people! The reel finishes, the lights go up, and Devon Gearhart continues his press tour unharmed. So with your ass on a plush folding chair and a bucket of popcorn in your lap, you secretly want to see that kid get shot. Trust me. You want it, even if you don’t know that you want it.

You, like nearly every other filmgoer, like being brought to the precipice of humanity—to be dangled over the edge so you can stare down into the abyss.

You love the thrill of getting nose-to-nose with evil, so long as you’re jerked out of harm’s way when it’s about to snap. So while you may turn away from violence in reality, you’re drawn towards it in the theater. Haneke knows this, and he does everything in his power to use that against you. Namely, he makes *Funny Games*.

Pardon the spoiler, but you don’t see the 10-year-old getting shot in the face—Haneke turns his camera away from this and makes you watch the fridge raid, keenly aware of what’s going on in the next room. It makes you feel cheated—you endure every ounce of tension in the buildup and get no climactic payoff. And with the camera in this position, the lens catches a unique angle, one that we’ve never seen before. Slightly off-axis, it manages to pick up a ray of reflective light, and for a moment, you can catch a glimpse of yourself watching the movie: a snarling,

YOU SECRETLY WANT TO SEE THAT KID
GET SHOT. TRUST ME. YOU WANT IT, EVEN
IF YOU DON’T KNOW THAT YOU WANT IT.

////////////////////////////////////

drooling sadist, hooked on the thrill from watching others suffer. Hey, everyone’s thinking it, I’m just saying it. Follow that up with a nearly 10 minute-long shot that holds the child’s corpse in the corner and you’ll begin to feel sick at what you had initially felt cheated out of seeing.

Haneke surely leads you to that sought-after abyss, but unlike those other gore-porn directors, he doesn’t pull you back at the last moment. No, it’s quite the opposite, actually—he slowly advances, pushing you further and further towards that precipice, and just when you think he can’t push you any further, he smirks as he watches you fall into that pit that we love to look into but would dread to be in. \\\



BY LAURA HEDLI

Photo by Daniella Zalcman

Photo by Daniella Zalcmán

To appreciate the power and scope of New York theater, we needn't look any further than recent history. On the first day of what would be a 19-day strike that hit all but seven commercial houses, angry patrons, stoic house managers, empowered stage hands, and a few bleary-eyed young stars demonstrated Broadway's place in the Big Apple. In an online statement released by Charlotte St. Martin, executive director for the League of American Theaters & Producers, it was reported that the strike would cost the industry nearly \$17 million a day—an impact of show-stopping proportions.

When I went to midtown to get the dish on all the drama, I came across a disappointed trio from Ohio. The three friends had planned to get their fill of show tunes in one jam-packed weekend—squeezing five Broadway shows into their now-foiled itinerary.

“We came here because we're theater lovers. We've been to New York before, we've seen the museums, and we've gone to Central Park. We're subscribers to Columbus and Cleveland theaters,” one of the women says. “But we came here to see these shows—to see New York theater.”

While the strike certainly put Broadway's business front and center, it also illuminated New York City's place as a national theatrical landmark. The New York theatrical community is punctuated by countless voices and an on-the-go mentality. Across

the nation, regional stages are often funded by the government in order to serve their communities, and many even rival New York in artistic renown. But when it comes to diversity of talent and sheer extent of performances, they've got nothing on this place.

One way to put New York theater in some sort of context is to understand its past and its present, its partners and its rivals. In the following account, voices from around the nation sound off on the state of the stage and the rather complex relationships between Broadway and Off Broadway, New York commercial theater and regional not-for-profits. By taking a rather contemporary stab at the question, I ask: If theater, then why New York?

Side by Side

Our curtain opens on something familiar—Broadway, or more formally, New York commercial theater. *Wicked* and *The Little Mermaid*, *Jersey Boys* and *Legally Blonde*—they may work up an impressive buzz, attracting devoted fan bases with their splashy billboards and MTV specials. But just because commercial theater may be popular, this status doesn't necessarily undermine its artistic value.

“I think if you consider yourself a semi-serious

playwright, and you have grand literary pretensions, then you really owe it to yourself to—at least once in your career—do a show with tap-dancing seagulls and giant confetti canons just to keep things in perspective,” says Tony Award-winning playwright Doug Wright.

Wright lobbied for the job of book writer on Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, a story he holds close to his heart. Even though Wright typically pens productions based on historical figures—*Quills*, *I Am My Own Wife*, and most recently, *Grey Gardens*—he is now working on adapting the outdated *Showboat*, and this after waxing nostalgic about a 16-year-old mermaid and her best friend, Flounder.

“I suppose it would be very easy for me to sneer at commercial theater, and say, ‘Oh, it's lowest-common-denominator stuff. It exists just to bring to Broadway the tourists coming in to see *Mamma Mia* or *The Lion King*,’” says Jerry Manning, casting director at the Seattle repertory theater. “But you know what, I actually loved *Mamma Mia* and I thought *The Lion King* was extraordinary stage work. Good theater is good theater.”

“There has to be a balance between the commercial and the artistic,” actress Kristin Huffman says. Huffman made her debut on the Great White Way in John Doyle's revival of *Company* nearly a year and a half ago. She describes *Company* as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—a re-imagining of an inherently artistic Stephen Sondheim production that was able to withstand almost a full nine months of commercial exposure.

But before *Company* could even be considered a guppy among the Broadway sharks, it premiered in Ohio at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park—a regional theater. Regional theaters began to crop up in cities and suburbs all across America starting in the 1940s. As a direct reaction to for-profit theatrical ventures, these companies are designed with the idea that each citizen, no matter his or her location, should be able to enjoy the arts.

“Regional theater as a movement started in reaction to and to find a different way to produce theater other than commercial theater,” says Jennifer Kiger, Yale Repertory Theatre's director of new play development.

The movement really took off at the close of World War II. The goal of regional theater programming was to decentralize commercial theater and bring audiences to places that did not boast a Broadway proscenium.

Regional theaters are, by and large, government-enfranchised institutions, meaning that they get money from the government to fund their programming.

“We do what we do because we want to have a real dialogue and a substantive discourse with the community rather than making money,” says Aaron Young, managing director of the Fulton Opera House in Lancaster, Pa.

Young says that the house operates with a sort of internal rudder, which ensures the quality of its productions and engages the community in a meaningful way. “We've been finding audiences saying, ‘We don't need to go into New York because you're



Photo by Asiya Khaki

right here in our backyard,” he says.

Ed Sobel, director of new play development at the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago, finds the Windy City to be both a “fortifying” and “inspiring” place to work in theater. He describes a supportive and committed mentality that makes up the fabric of the city.

“I think in Chicago there is a real interest in trying to do good work,” Sobel says. “It’s less about whether doing this job is going to get you your next job.”

There continues to be a simmering competition between theater in Chicago and theater in New York. For a moment, let’s digress to examine some raw figures. Looking at the listings for shows in New York versus other cities, the gap is astounding. For April 1, 2008, Theater Mania had listed 843 shows in New York. The next leading contender was the center for film and television, Los Angeles. With a relatively measly 232 shows, it outranked Chicago’s 198. The difference between winner and runner-up here is over 600 shows.

But while Chicago may not have its own commercial equivalent of Broadway, what it does have is numerous, highly reputable non-profits, including the Steppenwolf, the Goodman Theatre, and the Chicago Shakes Theater.

“In Chicago, they’ve always been known for being a renegade that way,” Huffman says. “Sometimes they can be even more creative and more artistic because they don’t have to worry about pleasing so many producers and PR people.”

Still Christopher Burney, Barnard theater professor and assistant artistic director at Second Stage Theatre in New York, is often hard-pressed to find regional audiences as diverse as those in New York City. Second Stage Theatre is a not-for-profit, Off Broadway venue with a mainstage situated just steps away from Times Square. For nearly 30 years, it has offered viable alternatives for Broadway-hungry theatergoers that find themselves without tickets and in the area. But with a mix of plays and musicals that have garnered considerable critical acclaim, Second Stage also draws a sizeable subscription audience.

Burney is consistently amazed by how much New York audiences are able to bring to the table—he welcomes their penchant for offering fascinating



Photo by Asiya Khaki

A Great Big Casting Couch

“Whether we say, ‘I just want to be a working actor’—meaning ‘I’ll take anything’—we all want to be on Broadway,” Huffman says. “So why wouldn’t you go to New York if what you want to be is on Broadway?”

Prior to moving to New York, Huffman lived in Columbus, Ohio and took numerous gigs with the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. While she comfortably enjoyed doing three to four shows a year at regional theaters, “My agent said, ‘If you really want to do Broadway, you have to be closer to New York.’”

“There will be casts who are dying to do it [a show] in New York because of the exposure that that will give an actor,” Burney says of Second Stage premieres. “But they’re not willing to give six, seven, eight, nine months of their lives outside of New York” in a co-production.

Manning doesn’t find this sort of Broadway-centric mentality to be a universal sentiment, however.

have chosen to make their life here in Chicago and to stay here for 20, 30, 40 years, their whole careers really. They are not concerned with making it anywhere else except Chicago.”

And Huffman agrees. “Quite honestly the quality at those regional theaters is humongous,” she says, readily admitting that she’s seen shows outside of the city that match or surpass big-name Broadway productions in artistic quality and entertainment value. But, she qualifies, “That’s because they’re coming into New York, and they’re auditioning here.”

At the Fulton, Young estimates that approximately only 25 percent of their actors typically hail from central Pennsylvania or Philadelphia. The remaining 75 percent, he estimates, are based in New York. By living in New York, Huffman explains, “You can get yourself in front of the right people time after time after time.”

Ever since Huffman began acting professionally, she’s been aware of the increasing power that casting directors have assumed in the industry. These individuals are often employed by for-profit talent agencies—Berney Telsey Casting, Tara Rubin Casting, and Jay Binder Casting are among the largest—and they are in charge of casting all the commercial shows in addition to many of the regional theatrical productions. There are similar casting branches in Chicago and Los Angeles, but New York is certainly the hub with regards to the stage.

“The truth of the matter is, they’re a tremendous resource for any producing organization, be it commercial, non-profit, resident theater, or film,” Manning says. “It’s an enormous asset for any producer who’s looking to hire actors out of New York.”

But on the West Coast, Manning gives anywhere from 65 to 70 percent of his Actors Equity Association contracts to Seattle-based performing artists. And while he consults with other resident casting directors around the nation when looking for talent outside of the Puget Sound area, rarely will he turn to casting powerhouses like Telsey.

Similarly, Erica Daniels, the Steppenwolf’s in-house casting director, attends different shows in the community about twice a week in order to strengthen her working knowledge of the area’s talent. “She takes it upon herself to make that kind of commitment to really be seeing people who she may not know,” Sobel says. “There’s a kind of openness to discovering new talent, to really try to widen one’s pool—I think a high priority is placed on that in Chicago.”

Commercial casting agencies on the other hand “are casting, yes, project by project, but they’re

“I THINK IF YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A SEMI-SERIOUS PLAYWRIGHT, AND YOU HAVE GRAND LITERARY PRETENSIONS, THEN YOU REALLY OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO—AT LEAST ONCE IN YOUR CAREER—DO A SHOW WITH TAP-DANCING SEAGULLS AND GIANT CONFETTI CANNONS JUST TO KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE.”

and intelligent feedback to the shows that Second Stage produces.

“New York is very unique, and it is a truly global city. I think unlike some of the other cities in this country, everything is so compressed that everything sort of lives, literally, quite on top of each other,” Burney says. “As a result, it forces us into this sort of incredibly intimate proximity with our neighbors and with our global neighbors—I think it fosters a different kind of dialogue.”

“I don’t think that center of power—that kind of center of global attention—would ever leave New York simply because it’s such a neat place,” Burney concludes. “It’s become such a cultural myth all unto itself.”

“I just think that for most working actors, their goal is simply to work,” he says. “I think there is a very rich life for an actor outside of New York and outside of L.A., and I think that most actors know that.”

Before assuming his position at the Seattle Repertory Theater, Manning was a member of the artistic staff at the New York Theater Workshop, which provided him with a working knowledge of the talent in both cities.

“The prevailing thought is that people in Chicago, Seattle, Minneapolis, Atlanta, and D.C. are getting their resumés together so that they can go to the big time, and I just think that’s a lot of hooey,” Manning says.

Seconding this notion, Steppenwolf’s Sobel says, “There is absolutely a core of people who

focusing on roles,” Manning says. And often this hyper-detail-oriented approach results in type-casting.

Sometimes it’s as superficial as a costuming issue. For instance, when *Beauty and the Beast* was running on Broadway, the Beast’s costume cost upwards of \$40,000. Such an exorbitant figure required the male lead to be consistently of the same height and build. Because agency casting directors are now first

edge it,” Burney says. “A really good review in New York does have the ability to make your show run longer, have your show be done by hundreds of theaters across the country, and if you’re a writer, it could possibly even get you a TV or film deal—it can carry a lot of power for one person’s opinion of what he’s seeing.”

With so much at stake in premiering a show, and especially a show in New York, the latest trends on

in check,” Burney explains.

Wright—whose credits include movies, musicals, and plays—hasn’t always been able to follow this model, however. Often discouraged by a sort of addendum in this regional developmental trend, he finds that companies will quickly nab new musicals but may be less inclined to produce new plays before they have secured their reputation in New York.

“I had an amusing experience with straight plays,” he says. “You find then that you’re premiering a brand new play at a very well-regarded but cash-strapped theater downtown. You have a \$10,000 set budget, and the actors are all making about \$300 a week. You’re really doing the play under guerilla conditions, and at the same time the work is going to be judged for all time.”

Wright finds the whole process to be a catch-22. “You know, it’s funny,” he says. “Sometimes with new plays, you have to premiere them in New York under the least favorable conditions to then get them produced in the resident theaters, which are actually the theaters that can afford to do them in a fitting way.”

But Americans have a penchant for musical theater, and as such, musicals are often able to draw more of a crowd than straight plays will. Because regional venues rely on this commercial appeal to attract theatergoers, Young says that their seasons at the Fulton include more musicals than non-musicals. He refers to it as “Populist Theater.”

“In a non-profit setting we’re under tremendous pressure to produce at the box office,” Manning says, speaking on behalf of the Seattle Repertory Theater. “In any season around the country, you’ll find major resident theaters doing *Christmas Carol*, not because the artistic director is dying to do *Christmas Carol* again as rich, fulfilling artistic endeavor for the entire company. They do it because they know they can sell those tickets and thereby underwrite more challenging work.”

“We’re probably going to be able to do one or two plays per year that appeal to a more ... intellectual audience,” Young says. “The majority of our plays are going to have to really appeal to a very mass audience. It certainly affects the choices that we do.”

While many acknowledge a discrepancy between programming and producing, the regional theater’s stake in developing new work defines today’s theatrical offerings. Kiger feels that writers truly benefit by being able to see their work performed at multiple regional runs. “Sometimes it’s only then that they have ideas about how they really wanted to tell the story,” she says.

One Singular Sensation

While regional theater is surely an invaluable institution that has succeeded in providing a creative outlet to performers around the country, getting audiences back into their seats, and bringing quality entertainment to communities outside of the tristate area, the draw of the New York stage is unshakable and unstoppable. Perhaps New York theater’s success is, in fact, due to its unique harmony between the commercial and the non-profit, the Broadway and the Off Broadway—a union that produces an astronomical number of theatrical offerings.

So, while each city may take pride in the work ethic of its actors or the quality of its entertainment, each city alone can only provide a mere taste of American theatrics in comparison to New York. And while New York may offer a range in performance quality, it’s much like the city itself in that you can find anything here. Whether you’re an audience member or an actress, a playwright or a director, the opportunities the Big Apple provides in the way of theatrical arts are vast and wide in breadth. In an age of choice, who could ask for anything more? \\\

“I DON’T THINK THAT CENTER OF POWER ... WOULD EVER LEAVE NEW YORK. IT’S BECOME SUCH A CULTURAL MYTH ALL UNTO ITSELF.”

in the chain of command, one must fit all the necessary criteria in order to land the role.

Conversely, Manning, while certainly having a say, does not have the last word at the Seattle repertory theater. The actual act of making a casting selection is reserved for the director. “It’s not so much naming the actor but having named an actor, having the discussion with the director about why this person is right for the role or not,” Manning says. “Every conversation I have refines and expands my understanding of the character.”

“In Seattle—if I auditioned there—it’d be much more relaxed. They’d take much more time with me, and there’d be less people. I’d probably have a better shot at getting a part that I’m not exactly right for looks-wise, or something might be a little off, but they really like the job that I did when I came in and auditioned,” Huffman says. “In New York because I’m going against so many people, I have to make my impression really fast. I have to be dead-on with what they’re looking for because they have just so many to choose from.”

The Times, They Are A-Changin’

Singer-songwriter Duncan Sheik used the words “leap of faith” to characterize *Spring Awakening*’s move to the Great White Way. The show was quickly set on a Broadway trajectory upon completion of its Off Broadway run at the Atlantic Theater. Similarly, *August: Osage County* opened on Broadway after its Chicago debut, and Sobel describes this transfer using the same expression.

“We did not know—we had no idea, in fact, it was probably the furthest thing from our minds—that the play would end up transferring to New York,” Sobel says. “It defies all logic and common sense in the current climate that any commercial producer would be interested in a 13-character, three-and-a-half-hour family drama.” A couple years back, the Steppenwolf commissioned ensemble member Tracy Letts to write a large-scale family drama. Now the *New York Times* hails his work as “the most exciting new American play Broadway has seen in years.”

But what happens when the critics aren’t so adoring? “If a play starts in New York, and say, gets a bad review in the *New York Times*, then that can kill the play’s future forever,” Kiger says.

Local critics are less of a threat, especially given the dwindling sales of print publication. And while writers from *Variety* and the Associated Press, as well as other major national critics, can certainly also impact the fate of a show outside of New York, the Big Apple’s reviewers do tend to wield a powerful bite.

“New York critics are aware of this, though I’m not sure that they would ever publicly acknowl-

the theatrical front are working to alleviate this pressure and minimize the costs.

“The difference now is that more and more regional theaters are putting resources and time into creating new work on their own,” Kiger says. “New plays are actually starting in the regions and having several productions all over the country before they go into New York.”

It used to be that new work was primarily developed on the New York stage. Only after a show received the stamp of approval from the city’s critics and was bolstered by favorable ticket sales, did it migrate out into regional theaters. This was made possible, in part, because there was commercial Off Broadway theater.

“No one can really seem to make that work anymore, the way in which it used to work back in the ’80s and even early ’90s,” Burney says. “Now you have the not-for-profit, Off Broadway theaters having this huge pressure to deliver what seem like commercial hits while staying true to their missions.”

In the past decade or so, regional theaters have stepped in and shouldered some of this responsibility. Kiger credits this surge in resident, new-play programming to an increase in funding from private organizations, individual donors, and even the government’s National Endowment for the Arts. Co-producing via institutional partnering between theaters is also a common developmental approach that diffuses the cost between two or more theaters investing in a new work.

Regional premieres are chiefly important because they let the cast and creative team grow together. Under this government-funded expenditure, artists are free to explore the process of transforming a new piece of work from page to stage.

“I want to do my damndest to get a resident production first so that I can work the kinks out over time,” Wright says. In 2004, Wright won a Tony Award for *I Am My Own Wife*—a show about a notorious transvestite, in which one actor plays more than 40 parts.

Charting his path on the road to Broadway—which included stops at the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab in Park City, Utah, La Jolla Playhouse in Los Angeles, the About Face Theater in Chicago, and finally the Off Broadway Playwrights Horizons theater in New York—Wright feels strongly about the process, going as far as to describe his journey as an ideal one. “By the time we got to New York it was a more sure-footed production and truly finished draft of the play,” he says.

“There’s another model that’s existing now in regionals—that is, these kinds of mini tours,” Burney says. As Wright’s experience has demonstrated, a play will often be developed at one theater, and then it will tour to two or three other regional venues. “It’s a way for all the theaters to keep their expenses

Gimme MoSex

does a collection of erotica deserve to be called a museum?

BY GINIA SWEENEY

PHOTO BY ISABELLE MILLS-TANNENBAUM

THE MUSEUM OF SEX is surprisingly crowded on a Friday afternoon. Besides the expected groups of giggling teens wandering through the racy galleries, there are older couples exploring together, and a middle-aged man, Chuck, who has come for a visit on his last day touring the city from Hawaii. The museum is an odd place on the outside: with its colorful, enticing window signs, it stands out in the bleak landscape of the East 20s. But this oddness is nothing compared to the bizarre scene inside.

The Museum of Sex is not technically a museum, as it was denied not-for-profit status when it opened in

essentially the wares of a sex shop. Scores of vibrators and dildos are justified by wall text explaining that sex toys are “often appreciated for their aesthetic value as well as their ability to provide pleasure.” The explanation is a stretch, for the exhibit seems more exhibitionist than artistic. A display case that features all matters of condoms is accompanied by wall text rationalizing their presence with the words, “Condoms are now available in a variety of colors, flavors, shapes and textures. With an emphasis on safe sex, whether for the prevention of disease or pregnancy, condoms have become chic.”

“Sex in Design” really made me wonder what mo-

it’s successful, for patrons are much more focused on the racy images on screen than the explanations next to them on the wall. It is a bizarre scene: a group of people—strangers—sitting together and raptly watching a video about the *Kama Sutra*. A female voice explained various sex positions while a couple demonstrated—rather explicitly. Again, the educational or artistic value of such a display is challenged when I realized the video is on a loop and repeats while the same people watch.

I belong to a sex-positive camp that believes in openness about sex in American culture. We need to talk about things much more than we do. Along these lines, a museum that opens the discourse about sexuality would appear to be a positive entity in a rather repressed society. MoSex doesn’t really succeed in this sense, either, because the crowd appears largely self-selected, with some patrons looking embarrassed about their very presence in such a place. One woman angrily confronts a *Spectator* photographer, even though the camera is pointed nowhere near her. Even the woman working in the gift shop (which has a healthy selection of the same sex toys on display just a few rooms away) tells me she is uncomfortable discussing the museum on tape.

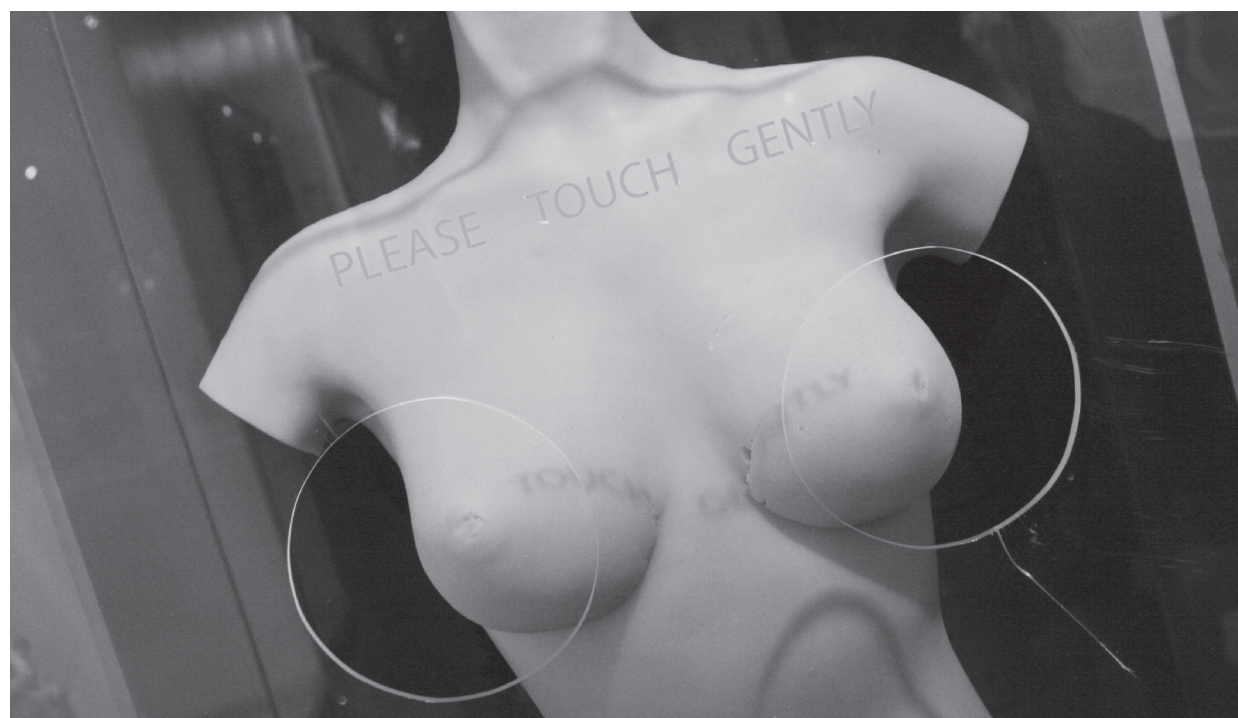
Although most of the people I talk to say they found the museum educational and informative, it doesn’t

The museum’s exhibits feature a variety of interactive displays.

really contain anything one couldn’t learn by browsing the Internet for an hour or so. A man who declines to give his name, but who seemed to enjoy sexual joking while I interviewed him about visiting

the museum with his girlfriend, is not particularly impressed with the contents of the museum. “I’ve seen it all,” he tells me. He does, however, tell me they would later try out some of the things they saw at the museum.

Yet I think there’s value in the experience one can have at MoSex. It’s one of the only places one can go to look at explicitly sexual content in the company of



2002. As such, it functions as a for-profit organization, a fact perhaps reflected in the rather high admission prices considering the rather small size of the building. Students are charged \$13.50 for entrance, though \$3-off coupons are ubiquitous in New York publications. This ambiguous status is one reason to question the museum’s place in the pantheon of New York art institutions. Is it a museum, there for educational purposes or to display art, or is it no better than a tourist attraction or a sexually explicit exhibition hall?

The Museum of Sex forces one to define the word “museum.” Must a museum host artwork? If so, do sex toys and pornography qualify as art? The permanent collection holds several prints by Keith Haring and one by Pablo Picasso, but the rest of the contents are much more utilitarian than artistic or aesthetic. An anonymous man with his girlfriend argued that museums do not, in fact, have to contain art—he gives the American Museum of Natural History as an example. You go there, he says, to learn about history and humanity and science, and you go to the Museum of Sex to learn about sexuality.

The newest exhibit at the Museum of Sex is called “Sex in Design.” After a thoroughly un-groundbreaking introduction featuring sexualized album and magazine covers, the contents of the exhibit turn into es-

tivates people to come to the Museum of Sex and shell out \$15 instead of just stopping into one of Babeland’s many locations. But an answer began to appear as I talk to patrons. Erika, a teenager visiting the museum with college friends, tells me that she is much more comfortable looking at sex accoutrements in a museum environment than somewhere else. She says the exhibit’s

THE MUSEUM OF SEX FORCES ONE TO CONSIDER IF PLACING WALL TEXT NEXT TO A DILDO LENDS IT LEGITIMATE ARTISTIC VALUE.

few antique vibrators—the kind doctors used to use to treat women’s “hysteria”—show an educational aspect absent in some of the rest of the wares. Still, it is hard to imagine a more sexualized atmosphere than the one at the museum.

The second exhibition hall hosts “Sex and the Moving Image.” It is what it sounds like: essentially a room full of porn. The exhibit hopes to “take our practiced ‘cinematic gaze’ and refocus it on the historical, political, and social reason sex on screen has been represented in various manners over time.” I’m not so sure

strangers. Some are comfortable with it, while others supplement their curiosity with nervous laughter.

MoSex has yet to carve out its place in New York’s cultural landscape. It’s neither museum nor tourist attraction, but something in between. The differing reactions from visitors mirror the varied viewpoints of Americans on the controversial subject. The museum says it is here to educate, but until it can branch out from its X-rated content to something more artistic and new, it doesn’t warrant the museum title it has bestowed upon itself. \\\

Model Airheads

open season at *ANTM*

BY HILLARY BUSIS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL POST

I IMAGINED THAT ATTENDING an open casting call for *America's Next Top Model* would be a lot like getting to see the circus for free. I prepared myself for a popcorn-worthy spectacle—dragalicious cha-cha divas mingling with the “modelesque,” the excited chatter of would-be Janice Dickinsons bubbling like hot-tub jets, the girls’ squeals punctuated every now and then by outbursts like “Bitch poured beer on my weave!” or free-verse poetry, à la Cycle 6’s Jade (“If I only had the magic key / That would unlock the realms to the plateau of the highest me”).

As it turns out, I am mostly wrong. Sure, there are a few deluded divas gathered in and around the stately New Yorker Hotel on March 15, all hoping to be chosen to compete on Cycle 11—*Top Model* is divided into “cycles,” not seasons, because the network typically airs more than one competition per year—of The CW’s flagship show. Many of the hopefuls I talk to, though, are depressingly normal.

Maybe they’re just saving up their crazy for when they reach the audition room itself. According to Casting Director Michelle Mock-Falcon, a fresh-faced woman who has been with the show since its premiere in 2003, all sorts of characters have shown up at past open calls. “We have people that come, and they’re in their late 30s or even in their 40s. They just feel like this is their opportunity,” she says in an interview I conduct right before the casting call commences at 10:30 a.m. “We have boys that come all the time and try to sneak in. I’m like, ‘Sure, come on in and talk to Tyra on camera.’”

What Mock-Falcon and the rest of the *Top Model* creative team are looking for, though, are potential contestants who first and foremost pass a certain number of eligibility requirements—female, between 18 and 27 years old, no experience modeling in a national campaign, no shorter than 5’7”. Beyond the basics, it’s a matter of determination and drive. Mock-Falcon says that they are looking for “someone who is strong enough to be in the competition and who’s passionate enough.”

When I ask her how important things like personality and back-story are, though, she seems to falter for a minute. She pauses, then answers, “Personality, back-story, it all comes kind of in the same package. Some people come from—you know, they’ve had a great life. Some people, you know, have had a little bit of a roller coaster ride, you know? And I think that everything plays a part in that it’s how they deliver who they are, how they introduce themselves, how they come in, their walk, their attitude and the whole thing.” I don’t quite buy it—if finding girls who will create drama isn’t at least part of *Top Model*’s MO, then why does the lengthy application all the girls need to complete include reality contestant



Heather Kuzmich and Saleisha, a contestant and the winner, respectively, of *Top Model* Cycle 9

“SMILE WITH YOUR EYES,” SAYS A LEGGY BRUNETTE NAMED SIMONA, SPORTING GLAMOROUSLY OVERSIZED SUNGLASSES.

bait questions like, “What are you most ashamed of, either now or in your past?” and “Do you have a temper? How often do you lose your temper? What provokes you?”

I do, however, believe Mock-Falcon when she tells me just how involved Tyra Banks, *Top Model*’s host, executive producer, and patron saint, is when it comes to the show’s casting process. The model-cum-mogul apparently watches every single audition tape and acts as the final authority on who gets to “be on top, top, top,” as the show’s theme song puts it. The level of Tyra’s participation is surprising to the contestants as well, says Mock-Falcon. “Once the girls make it out for the semifinals, they’re in

shock, because she’ll sit there and say something about what they wrote on their application, or what they did on their tape. They’re like, ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe you know me!’”

Tyra doesn’t come to the auditions—“Sometimes we’ll be in a small city and they’ll be like, ‘Is Tyra Banks here?’ And I’m like, ‘Sorry, no, you get me,’” Mock-Falcon says, smiling. Nevertheless, her presence is palpable. There’s even a fierce picture of her pasted beneath the camera that will soon be recording the girls. When I ask Mock-Falcon about the picture, she laughs. “They found it easier when we had a picture of her up there,” she says. “And they really—they come in here, and they talk to her. We have girls that fall down on the ground, and they’re crying. I mean, they are just opening their hearts to her. And part of the success is her fan base. She has a huge following. And now with her talk show, the *Tyra* show, it is amazing. The girls come in here quoting her, and talking about what they’ve learned through her talk show, and they kind of combine the two.”

The girls who have been waiting for hours to audition certainly seem to verify Mock-Falcon’s pronouncements. Everyone I interview watches *Top Model*, even though some say they only do so when they have time. Many of them also answer affirmatively when I ask if they’ve picked up any tips from the show. “Smile with your eyes,” says a leggy brunette named Simona, sporting glamorously oversized sunglasses. “The things you don’t want to do are overeating, under eating, not exercising,” says

Amanda, a long-haired college student from Pennsylvania. I ask Amanda and her three friends if they have ever auditioned for a reality show before. Nobody but Amanda has—"I tried out for *Coyote Ugly* on CMT," she says, referring to *The Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search*, a competition for skanky wannabe

news team is filming girls at the other end of the line, though, inner beauty and my tape recorder are both immediately forgotten. "They're taking pictures!" a girl yells. "Pictures? Where?" asks Nikki. They whoop with glee as a lanky Amazon struts her stuff like she's walking for Miss J. Alexander himself.

"THE THINGS YOU DON'T WANT TO DO ARE OVEREATING, UNDER EATING, NOT EXERCISING," SAYS AMANDA, A LONGHAIR COLLEGE STUDENT FROM PENNSYLVANIA.

bartenders at the "legendary" nightspot. Amanda has also tried out for *American Idol*—"Is that a reality show, though?" After a moment of thought, her friends rule that it isn't.

Crystal, a friendly girl from New Hampshire with a dazzling smile and a prominently displayed Chanel purse, has also gleaned something important from past cycles. "Well, drama isn't good for the in-house, but I know it's good for TV," she says. Her mother, who has come along for moral support, also chimes in: "You gotta know how to walk. Like a model."

Nobody epitomizes the ideal *Top Model* contestant better than 24-year-old Nikki. She's lively and vivacious, the only audition-ee who approaches me before I can interview her. She introduces me to the friends she has made in line and tells me that they're going to form a band. "We're going to dance just so we can get some attention going on up here," she says. "We're going to be on TV. Get attention."

Then she gets a little more specific: "I need to be on TV before I turn 30." Getting her face on the small screen has been a long-term project for Nikki—"Make sure you take a note of this. I've been doing this since the first episode. This is my 11th time trying out," she says. I mention that Cycle 10 winner Jaslene also tried out and didn't make it onto the show initially, and Nikki cuts me off. "Yeah, and you know what? I kind of figured that, so I tried to take note of what she was doing, and it didn't help me very much. So now I got to try another angle."

Why does Nikki want to be on this particular show? Well, according to her, "*America's Next Top Model* isn't just about being pretty to me. It's like Tyra Banks says, she has her own little company outside of Ty Ty Baby [Tyra's production company] where she helps a lot of younger girls feel important about themselves. And I feel like *America's Next Top Model* shouldn't just be outside-beautiful, they should be beautiful on the inside, such as your poise, the way you talk to people, the way you carry yourself. And, if I was *America's Next Top Model*, I would show girls out there that you don't have to be beautiful...to be...beautiful." Pleased with herself, she repeats her new mantra a second time.

As soon as Nikki and her crew realize that a CW

Nikki, especially, lights up, shouting, "Strut your stuff, girl! You on camera!"

After the excitement dies down, Nikki turns back to me. I thank her for her time and tell her that I hope number 11 turns out to be the charm. She shakes my hand like a campaigning politician and bids me farewell, saying, solemnly, "Put me on TV, you know, one day, or put me on your newspaper, or whatever it is. And if I get on TV, I'll remember you, the columnist." \\\

Would-be top models waiting in line to audition
Photo courtesy of Allie Yee



True Life: I Was a Top Model Reject

"I have never seen that much food in my life!" I glance up, mid-bite of my Chipotle burrito. I am surrounded by towering, skinny girls, gazing in a mixture of surprise, disgust, and envy at what I consider a normal-sized meal.

I'm waiting in line for the open casting call for *America's Next Top Model*. I have already been standing outside for an hour, shivering in my dress and heels. There are thousands of hopeful contestants. The girl on my left keeps asking out loud, "Do you think Tyra is going to be there?" while the girl on my right, hiding her hungover face under giant sunglasses, continually rearticulates how much she needs to be a model. We all have completed our 15-page applications—"Describe your ideal romantic partner. When was the last time you hit, punched, kicked, or threw something in anger?" We all have practiced our responses to possible interview questions. We all have posed in the mirror and focused on "smiling with our eyes," just as Tyra suggests. But even more so, we all believe, or desperately want to believe, that Tyra tells the truth when she chronically proclaims that anyone can model, that modeling is a learned discipline rather than just a fortunately lean physique.

"Nicole McCormick. 19. 5'8". 135 pounds." I have been waiting since 10 a.m., and now, at 5:30 p.m., this is all I say to the casting director. I have stood in various lines for seven and a half hours, anxiously awaiting an interview. We had speculated what the actual casting process would entail. Most of us envisioned a short interview, where we would be able to convey how much we wanted to model. But all that waiting culminates in an anticlimactic sentence. I am in a small room with one hundred other girls, crammed against the wall. A cameraman films us while we quickly state our name, age, height, and weight. The only reference to Tyra is a photo of her taped under the camera, her fierce face absurdly watching us as we try to embody the *Top Model* persona while saying only a sentence.

After everyone has spoken, a single casting director calls out the numbers of three girls, those who have been chosen to continue to the next round of casting. While they rejoice, their twiggy frames bopping up in down in glee, the rest of us gather our coats and walk out the door to awkwardly stand by the elevators, a mass of rejected and dejected girls. Some are crying, some look relieved to have the whole process over. Everyone is exhausted. Most share the common feeling that we really didn't have the opportunity to accurately display ourselves. We thought that *America's Next Top Model* wanted something more than a lanky frame, but unfortunately, the attributes encouraged on the show—fun personality, an interesting look, intelligence and eloquence—are not really what ANTM truly promotes, at least according to my experience. One girl, a doe-eyed redhead, tries to console her fellow eliminated contestants. "Don't worry, guys," she says in a Southern accent, "we're just too pretty. Models are all weird looking. We're just *too* pretty."

—Nico McCormick

Sachs Machine

BY RAPHAEL POPE-SUSSMAN
PHOTO BY MOLLY CROSSIN



JStar
workin' the
winning
grin.

WITH THE COMING OF SPRING—the season of rebirth—we are again reminded of the beauty of nature but also of the fragility of our earth. Global warming, acid rain, Hannah Montana—these all pose a grave threat to the environment. And yet even at Columbia, we sometimes take this ecosystem for granted. Also there is a lot of poverty and stuff in the world. But one man, one sexy, sexy man, is changing all that. Jeffrey Sachs, economist, playboy, whiffleball champion, and, now, advocate for a sustainable future, sat down with *The Eye* last week for an excellent lead story on the work he's doing. Due to the rousing success of the article, this week, the humor section sat down with Sachs to ask him some burning questions in an exclusive (mock) interview.

EYE: Top of the morning, professor!

JS: Good morning.

EYE: So, Jeff, do you have a nickname you'd prefer

we use?

JS: My friends call me "JStar," because I am a star, and my first name starts with a "J."

EYE: Fascinating. We hear so much about all the work you do on sustainable development and poverty and all, but what's it like to be Jeff Sachs?

JS: Pulchritudinous! I am pulchritudinous. It's fantastic. Sometimes, after heroically pulling an entire village out of poverty with my bare hands, I just get this tremendous rush, and I tear off my shirt to reveal my bulging, well-oiled pectoral muscles.

EYE: Wow! That's awesome! All that good work you do must make you pretty damn irresistible to the womenfolk.

JS: Do you have some duct tape?

EYE: Uh, let me look, uh—

JS: Because I am ripped. (Sachs rolls up his sleeves and flexes his massive biceps.) Actually, I do get a tremendous amount of action, but I rarely hear ladies saying, "Oh Jeff, it's so hot what you're doing to alleviate poverty and the cycle of underdevelopment and de-development in the third world." They mostly just want a piece of this sculpted bod.

EYE: Did "shock therapy" destroy Russia's economy?

JS: Shock therapy! That's ridiculous! What is that like from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? I'm going to end poverty. Even if I have to fight a pack of ravenous hyenas, I will end poverty. I don't know "shock therapy."

EYE: I see. So you destroyed Russia's economy?

JS: Yeah, OK, but it was

pretty messed up already. Besides, it was more of a youthful mistake. I mean, I was only 40. As I like to say, when Mozart was 40, he'd already been dead for eight years. Wait, that sort of contradicts what I was saying. Still, it's catchy.

EYE: Very true, sir. Anyway, our little interview hour-glass is running low on sand, so we should probably wrap this one up. Final question: In a cage match between you and Bono, who would win?

JS: Are you kidding? I'd shove my shoe so far up his Dubliner ass, he'd be shitting Jeffrey Sachs' wingtips for a week. \\\

Housing Lottery Haiku

BY RAPHAEL POPE-SUSSMAN

McBain's not so bad
Just steps from tasty Deluxe
'Less you get shafted

You hear a pin drop
An endless serenity
Furnald Hall by night

We can choose a suite
Suite? It would be so sweet. But
You've got foot odor!



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The (Columbia) Sartorialist

anna meininger and esther adzhiashvili

TEXT BY SHIRLEY CHEN
PHOTOS BY MOLLY CROSSIN



Anna Meininger, CC '10

The transition to spring is always a tricky one, especially with the fickle weather we have experienced this year. Vests are a functional and stylish way to keep up with Mother Nature's mood swings. Here, key basics are employed to great effect: a crisp white shirt is layered over a brown tank to showcase a spring-break tan, and slim fit pants complete the look. The basics allow her vest to steal the show with its quirky mix of colorful prints and plaid pockets. Finished with a relaxed boot, this outfit has a very comfortable feel to it. My favorite part is the unexpected-but-fun toggle button detail.



Esther Adzhiashvili, CC '10

Plaid—divorced from its farmer-hick husband and downtown-hipster love affair—has developed a more polished look. This shirt is cut in a surprisingly sophisticated way and uses a fresh mix of electric colors. The brown boots lengthen her legs, and their semi-gloss quality highlights her beautiful hair. The essential component of the look, however, is the quiet blue creeping into her outfit, through her exotic gold bracelet and her subtle nail polish (Chanel blue satin, perhaps?). The bag and umbrella defend the case for statement accessories, although in this outfit, I suspect they were purely functional additions. Of course, even careless add-ons can impress—personal style is undeniable.

SOLE DESIRE BY MOIRA LYNCH

Anybody who likes red-carpet fashion can recognize a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes by their trademark red sole. The excellent exhibition, "Sole Desire: The Shoes of Christian Louboutin," currently on view at the FIT Museum, traces Louboutin's Hollywood-driven career. The show reveals that Louboutin's shoes became wildly popular only after young starlets started wearing them on the red carpet. Louboutin embraces his relationship with Hollywood and its media exposure. In recent years, the brand's fame has risen to the ranks of Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo, coinciding with the rise of celebrity-driven culture.

Louboutin's current work strikes a balance between elegance and sexiness, marking a departure from his

earlier pieces, which were often cutesy and humorous. A pair of lilac, pointy-toed Mary Janes with a two-inch heel and a pansy on the strap from 1994 is not nearly as sophisticated as Louboutin's shoes nowadays. And a pair of 1993 patent leather pumps, with heels built out of Guinness beer cans, exposes Louboutin's comical side. The contrast between his earlier and later designs is striking, yet the stylistic change is reconcilable with current trends. Throughout, the exhibition underscores Louboutin's flair for shape and color, some of the guiding themes of his work.

The show ends April 19.

The Museum at FIT is located at 7th Avenue and 27th Street, and admission is free.

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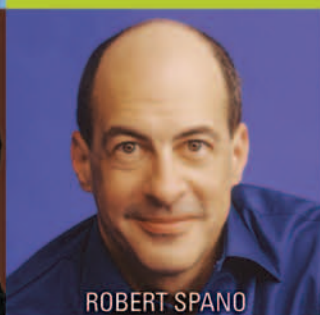
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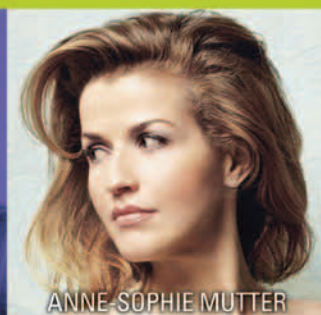
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