

Clockwise from top left: Evan Weissman, Brian Colonna, Samantha Schmitz, Erik Edborg, Erin Rollman, Matt Petraglia - not pictured Hannah Duggan.



## Flying By the Seat of Their Pants. Not Really.

### *Buntport Theater Behind the Scenes*

Buntport Theater premieres 15 shows a season and still manages to surprise audiences. After attending at least a dozen Buntport productions, I know to expect a quality show, but beyond that I'll just have to wait for the curtain's opening. The set may be suspended in midair, the cast could be sharing their stage with a hip-hop band or someone might run around tallying 'kills' on a chalkboard. They've performed comedies, dramatic works and even a horror. Their sitcom, "Magnets on the Fridge," relating the adventures of five non-readers who formed a book club, has a campy feel, but it's funnier and wittier than any television show out of Hollywood.

Buntport Theater has been creating shows since 1998 and became a presence in Denver when they found their own space in 2001. The black box theater is housed in a warehouse on Lipan Street in an out-of-the-way industrial area. Even so, it's created a stir, drawing in a youthful audience base that appreciates exper-

imental theater. The troupe's seven members are all Colorado College alumni who discovered a mutual interest in creating a quirky brand of theater. They started with a performance of Don Quixote just for fun, and over time, became serious about creating theater. Today, they collaboratively run the nonprofit theater, developing show concepts, writing scripts, building sets and performing. It may look like a blast to those of us sitting in the audience, but it doesn't happen easily.

The creative minds behind Buntport are talented, energetic—and opinionated. They not only log marathon concept meetings and set building sessions,

By Brenda Gillen

together they mesh their ideas and words into cohesive and interesting products. Individually, Erik Edborg, Brian Colonna, Erin Rollman, Hannah Duggan, Matt Petraglia, and the group's latecomers, Evan Weissman and SamAnTha Schmitz, are incredibly bright and interesting. But their power is in the collective. They speak in an almost "Star Trek" Borg-like manner, remarkably devoid of personal ego, but bursting with pride for the collaborative. Brian praises Erik's artistry, Matt's computer savvy and Sam's organizational skill, while Evan marvels at Erin's talent in weaving seven narratives into a cohesive script. They credit each other for their individual and collective achievements.

They've accomplished more than just landing butts in seats, although the pre-show queue indicates they're quite good at that. Another mark of their success is their numerous awards. Among their recognitions, last year *Westword* named Rollman "Best Actress in an Experimental Play" and honored Buntport with "Best Production" and "Best Experimental Play."

Jane Potts, program director at the Scientific & Cultural Facilities District, which provided financial support for the theater's current season, said Buntport is "intellectually spun."

"Oftentimes they take a manuscript that's very heavy and difficult and make it easy to relate to," Potts said.

One way they manage it is by turning tragedy into comedy. Shakespeare's bloody "Titus Andronicus" became a madcap comedy in Buntport's hands. They appeal to crowds more used to movies and television than traditional theater by making shorter shows, usually just one act comprised of two big scenes that run about an hour and a half without intermission. "Magnets on the Fridge" episodes, produced every other week, timed out at about 35 minutes. After five acclaimed seasons, Buntport retired the "Magnets" series this year, but the formula for developing the sitcom tells a lot about the group's drive and dedication. Each episode was derived from a book selected at random from audience suggestions. In less than two weeks, they managed to brainstorm, write, memorize, rehearse and perform the show. All the while, they worked on main stage shows without ever confusing the two.

"It's kind of like remembering the capitol of Alabama and four plus four. It uses different parts of the brain," Weissman said.

The sitcom, beloved by its devoted fans, wasn't known for its complexity. In the next-to-last episode, the plotline involved a battle of the bands between the book club and, Denver hip-hop band, The Flobots. The Buntport cast shared the stage with The Flobots, affording the real musicians ample playtime.

## The Collective

Buntport doesn't claim to produce high art right out of the gate.

"We're doing 13 episodes of Magnets each season," said Weissman. "When you're doing that every other week, you're bound to write a crappy bit every once in a while."

Colonna said working in a collaborative group gives everyone the freedom to experiment and fail. The collective ultimately is responsible for the piece and the 'crappy bit' from a first

draft is finessed by the group or cut long before the final draft. But it's no excuse to get sloppy.

"The collaborative phases bad things out, but it relies on the individuals all being aggressive and attentive themselves," Colonna said.

While other local theater groups may collaborate on scripts, the full ensemble rarely gets involved in everything from hammering out plotlines to pounding nails. Without the traditional positions of director, playwright, set designer, stage manager and actors, the Buntport team steps up to fill multiple roles. Rather than a hierarchy, tasks are divvied up based on skills and availability. Everyone does a bit of everything off-stage. All, save Petraglia and Schmitz, fill roles onstage.

Rollman said it's much more fulfilling to be involved in and responsible for a variety of tasks.

"It's deeply unusual to have actors involved in every stage like this," said Rollman. "Other groups collaborate, but they usually involve people outside of the process in terms of the end product. This is a true collaboration where we're all involved in every aspect."

You're saying lines you wrote, wearing a costume you sewed and standing in front of a backdrop you painted. You own your success and failure in a complete way," Rollman said.

But sometimes, she admits, collaboration is painful. Getting the group's consensus, Rollman says, can be an excruciatingly slow process.

"Decisions would get made much quicker if someone was in charge. At Buntport, if you can defend your idea, discussions can last endlessly."

## Show Life

Conception to production is a frenetic, yet tedious process for members of Buntport Theater. Frenetic because Buntport shows are developed quickly—over a couple of weeks to a month—

and economic realities demand that the group produce often. To pay the rent, they lease out their space as much as possible, leaving less time to build sets and rehearse. It's tedious because the collective weighs in on everything, from outlandish initial concepts (which often are the ones selected) to scene sequencing. They "hash out" the look of the costuming and set and debate the tone in which a particular line of dialogue should be delivered.

Buntport's ensemble may be free spirited, but their recipe for making shows follows a surprisingly structured method. In every stage, from gathering ideas to putting the finishing touches on the set, individuals go out and collect information. The collective discuss-



## CREATIVE FRONT &gt; BUNTPORT

es the finds and makes plans on how to proceed. They continually check in with each other so that everyone has buy-in on everything.

Like all great art, it starts with an idea. First, they meet for a four-hour brainstorming session. Everyone comes with ideas and is prepared to explain how they'll present the story.

Colonna and Weissman described how it works.

"Long, tedious time passes where ideas percolate," Colonna said. "What you have to be comfortable with is just sitting there for a long time. If people are intrigued by the idea, there's a discussion."

"People don't feel like they have to say, 'I don't like what you did,'" Weissman said.

"If you hear the crickets, then that's that," Colonna said.

They admit that in the process of defending an idea, tempers sometimes flare.

"Nobody's been punched in the face," Weissman said. "Not yet."

So which ideas aren't met with the crickets?

"We're looking for the funny. If it makes us laugh it will probably get in the show," Weissman said.

Ideas, they say, generally come from three areas: things they've read, visual aspects and from self-imposed limitations.

They rarely do straight adaptations, but the original Buntport piece, "A Synopsis of Butchery," germinated from the book, *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women* by Ricky Jay. Jay's collection of weird, true facts included the story of famed mentalist Washington Irving Bishop. In the late 1800s, he died suddenly and doctors decided to see if there was anything unusual about Bishop's brain. His mother, Eleanor Bishop, a failed actress and semi-successful medium, believed her son had been in a death-like trance and that the autopsy had killed him. She lost her lawsuit against the doctors and spent the remainder of her life publicly mourning her son in theatrical performances about his death.

The intriguing story had never made it out of brainstorming sessions until it garnered the largest number of audience votes to be made into a full-length production.

Once an idea is selected, the group goes into a development phase, taking time to research and lay out the plot. For "Butchery" they had the basic facts of the Bishops' lives, but they needed to know more about the time period, spiritualists and stage designs of the era. People took on different research tasks and brought what they'd found back to the group.

Writing follows a similar pattern. They write individually in sections, choosing the scenes they want to write. Together they read over what they've written, discovering that they're missing important pieces or someone's section needs more work.

"We meet with revised and new scenes until we get to a point where we think we've covered all our bases in terms of the plotline," said Colonna. "Scripts are due three to four weeks before performance so we have time to memorize and rehearse. To get to that point, we'll make goals and hold to those so our timeline stays on track."

In a rough storyboard session, they figure out sequencing. Often what was written for the beginning doesn't work anymore.

After the collective "mashing," the sections of script are handed over to Rollman for editing. They've learned it's best to have one person in charge of turning seven writers' work (including her own) into one cohesive piece.

She adds transitions to make scenes flow together, and works on the tone, sequencing and pace.

"I come up with a fairly complete script, but it's always open to discussion," she said. "Even while rehearsing we make some pretty big cuts and move things—because sometimes when you hear it out loud you realize there are problems."

Before rehearsals, they do a draft read to hear the entire edited work. Most often everyone offers up more suggestions for Rollman. After a few rounds of editing, the script is distributed so that the actors can start memorizing their lines.

## The Set

The most important player at Buntport isn't even human. Considered from the first concept meeting, the set is the character that sets the tone of every production and its design goes hand in hand with plot development.

The set can be Buntport's most troublesome character. "The Odyssey: A Walking Tour" was set up like a museum tour. Audience members walked through a maze wearing Walkmans to hear the show's sound. But the night before it opened, the sound wasn't working. The entire production hinged on the audio functioning properly, so it had to be fixed.

"We couldn't get this radio transmitter to work the way that we wanted it to," Colonna remembered. "It was tense. Matt and I were here at three in the morning hanging copper wire to try to get this thing to work. We were really pissed off at one another but where are you going to go? You can't go home."

On nights like that, one of Buntport's crew, often Matt, winds up sleeping in the waiting area's pillow-filled tub.

It's important, Colonna said, to have the show world created before rehearsals.

"We'll rehearse for a solid week with the technical components," he said. "We're actually standing where we'll be standing [during the performance] and it helps to get a physical memory of the show and the dialogue."

## On Stage

In rehearsals, the collective playwrights may change the script yet again.

"I'm sure 'real deal' playwrights who work for years on their thing...that must just kill them to see all these productions [with improvisation]," Weissman said.

At the show's opening, most actors get tense, but Buntport members say that's when they finally relax. The script is done, the stage is set and all they have to do is get ready for the audience. Everyone







performs a vital role at performances, whether they're on or offstage, but show times are a relief from the multitude of tasks required to get to that point.

But despite what audiences may believe, Buntport does very little onstage improvisation. Colonna said they neither have the energy to make changes, nor would they risk presenting a piece the actors are unsure about because it's been changed so many times.

"We don't want our main stage shows to have a feel of improvisation. 'Magnets' has little bits where people think it's improv, but it's all written. We improv in rehearsal, but the product is all hashed out," he said.

Although the work is a group effort, Colonna said there's "a kind of mental tally" when one of his lines gets a big laugh. But before long, it gets blended into the collective.

Mary Sprunger-Froese, a director and actor with the Colorado Springs-based volunteer ensemble, First Strike Theatre, has guest performed with Buntport Theater. She said Buntport is "refreshingly egalitarian."

"They're an ongoing troupe, a creative cooperative in it together. The people all seem to have an equal input into the product," said Sprunger-Froese. "That demands a high level of trust and cooperation and creates a situation where the ego can't lead. They know each other's strengths and let each other shine."

## Business Matters

Despite its non-profit status, Buntport still has to make money. Although they hope to keep presenting original work in Denver, Colonna said they'd need a larger audience base to keep going long term. Currently, part-time jobs outside the theater keep members afloat, but they're forced to fit theatrical work into their off-hours.

"We're turning into 30-somethings. We want things like houses and health insurance," Colonna said. "This is a town that supports four major sports teams."

The financial hardships are allayed slightly by the benefit of working with friends.

"I know when I'm pushing someone to their breaking point," Colonna said. "I think that only happens where people know each other well. And because we're friends there sometimes is a half hour side conversation in a four-hour meeting. A story about last night's date trumps whatever else happens in a meeting."

But after hearing about their friend's date, the group of friends who are Buntport Theater will get back to the business of creating their product—transformative theater.

"This," Weissman said, gesturing at the theater, "is not an assignment; it's something we get to do."

Brenda Gillen is writer living in Denver. She operates at the crossroads of the freelance atlas where fiction, poetry and journalism collide. Incidentally, she is the solo author of this piece.

For more information: [www.buntport.com](http://www.buntport.com)

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