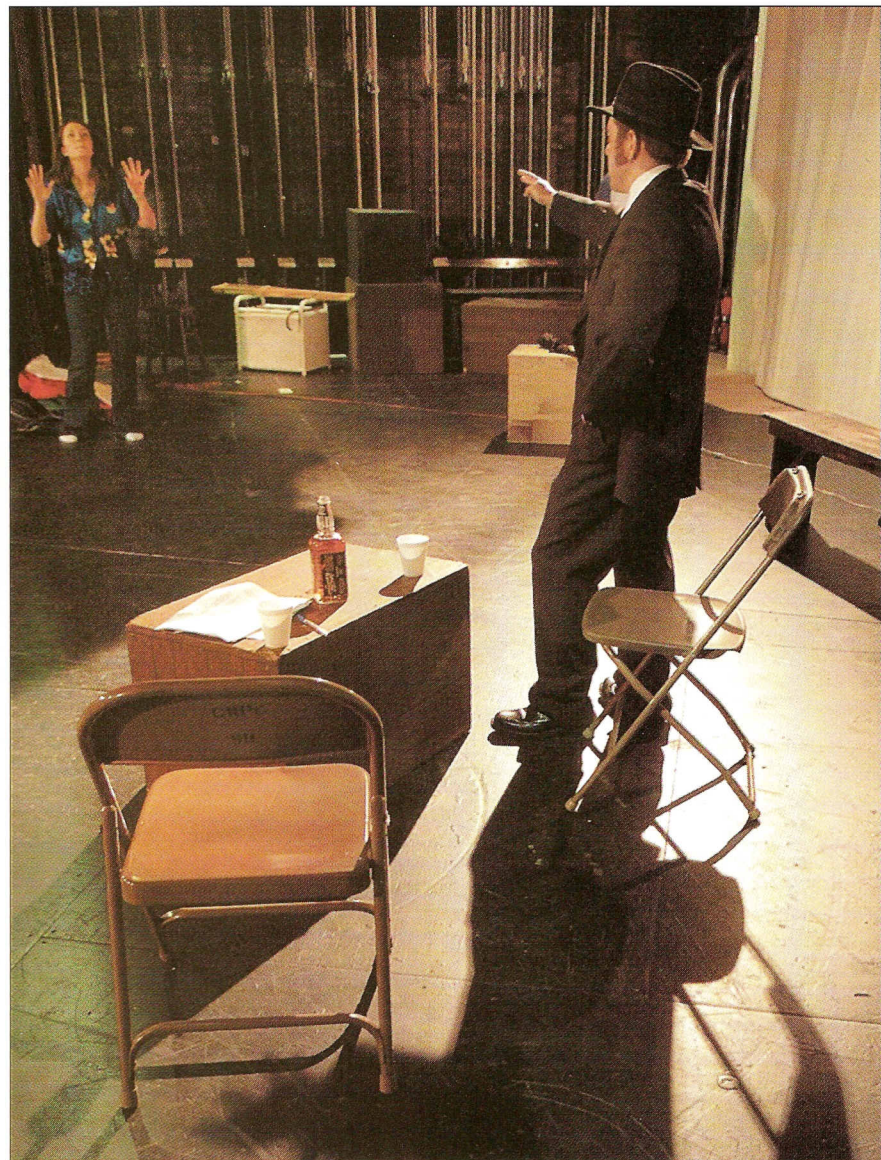


# Instant plays

The challenge to 32 stage veterans: Perform six short works exactly one day after beginning to conceive, write and rehearse them.

BY SUSAN  
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Terry Schoone-Jongen (foreground) and Sara Brunet practicing a scene from *The Endless Coil*.

The stage of the black box theater at the downtown Columbus Performing Arts Center is really the room's floor, with folding chairs arranged on risers on three sides. No curtain is in sight.

In short, there is nowhere to hide.

For the 32 actors, writers and directors who will be arriving at 8 pm this Friday in mid January, the open space signifies a challenge. In about 24 hours, the seats will be filled with an audience to watch performers in short plays that have yet to be written—let alone even conceived. Call it instant theater, which is not for the faint-hearted.

Formally, it goes by the name *Bride of 24 Hours* and involves participants from such theater companies as CATCO, Actors' Theatre, MadLab, Foolish Bison Players, Columbus Children's Theatre and

Total Theatre, among others. By design, the actors come dressed in costumes and carrying props; the writers and directors come with open minds. By 8:30 pm, six teams are randomly selected, each with a writer, a director and three or four actors. By 9 pm, the writers have left to go write, armed with Polaroids of their actors. By Saturday morning, teams reassemble to receive scripts and begin the harried race to get a play in order (without embarrassing themselves) by 8 pm that night. That is when the fruits of their labor will be tasted by an audience.

Will it be sweet or sour?

This artistic gamble is organized by BlueForms Theatre Group, a semiprofessional company comprising a dozen twentysomethings interested in creating new theater. Two years ago, it produced a similar event based on an idea hatched by Red Herring in 2002.

"My personal belief is it's a great way to build community among different theater groups in Columbus," says Brant Jones, a BlueForms member who served as producer for *Bride of 24 Hours*. "It's so easy to be fractured and isolated and this is a great reminder that we're all together in Columbus."

By 8:15 am Saturday, it's time to be *really* together. For the next 12 hours, cast and crew will occupy almost all of the available space at the city-owned arts center, from the basement to the dressing rooms and the hallways to a cluttered scene shop.

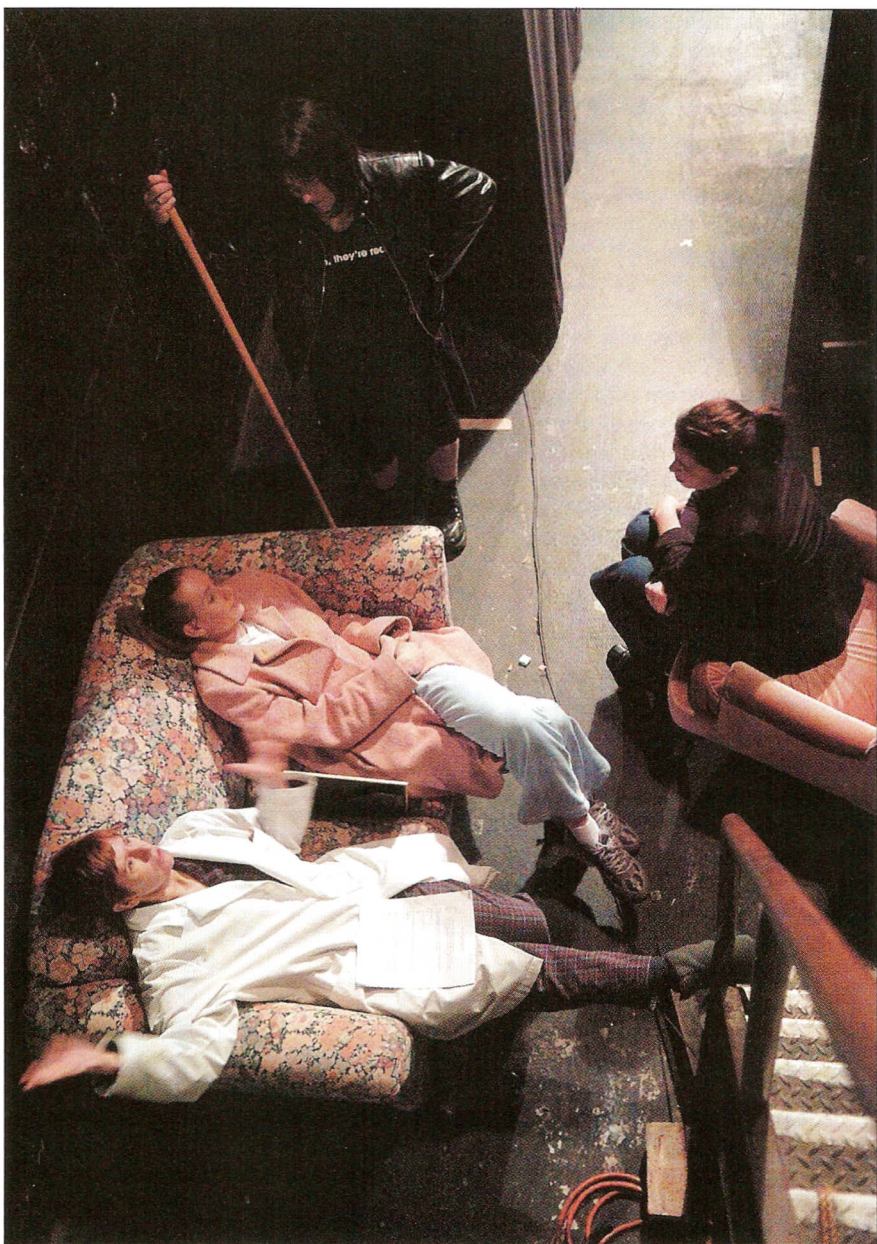
Early on this morning, writer John Kuhn, artistic director of Actors' Theatre, and his director, Elizabeth Nolan Brown, founder of Miscreant Productions, begin to review the details of the play he finished writing just hours earlier: *The Endless Coil*. Kuhn finds the pressure exhilarating. "It's such a rush because you've got a gun to your head," he says.

At home in Mount Vernon the night before, studying the Polaroid snapshots of his three actors, he had his aha moment: He would write a play revolving around the theories of Sigmund Freud. He was inspired in part by the actors' costumes and props. The Id is Sarah Brunet (holding a bottle of whiskey while wearing a Hawaiian shirt, heels and pink leg warmers pulled over her jeans). The Super Ego is Terry Schoone-Jongen (a slightly too large zoot suit, a black umbrella and a fedora cocked jauntily on his head). The Ego is Stephen Woosley (khakis and a sloppy unbuttoned shirt revealing a white undershirt while clutching a dry erase board with the words "Not to be taken away" scrawled on it).

"I decided to put in dramatic form the conflict between these three aspects of the conscience," Kuhn says.

Meanwhile, writer Mark Mann, who is the education director for Columbus Children's Theatre, built a script around a man in a bathrobe, a foot-high statue of a sleeping Mexican and another man in black sunglasses and a trench coat. It's called *Down Mexico Way*—a spoof of spy movies with two secret agents competing to acquire a package from a courier. "The trick is not to make it a 'Saturday Night Live' sketch," Mann says. "It has to be a play, with actual scenes and dialogue."

Most writers develop comedies. *Scratch Game*, which one actress refers to as a "nicely written sitcom," has quirky characters speaking a lot of short, snappy dia-



During a rehearsal of *Spring Break with the Log Lady*.

logue, as does *Spring Break with the Log Lady*. Another play, *Humble Pie*, features a character making a serious decision about her career and family, but still has plenty of funny moments. Only one script, *Feather Boa with Price Tag, Military Shirt, Jogging Clothes, Prom Dress*, is non-narrative, with an all-female cast reflecting on what it means to be a modern woman.

The brevity of the plays doesn't help. "It can be really hard to write a script with a beginning, middle and end that wraps up in 10 to 15 minutes," Jones says.

For a typical show, actors usually get a few weeks to memorize lines. Now, it's just a matter of hours. By 10 am, the writers and directors from five of the groups have met to discuss the scripts. Most of the writers depart, leaving the directors to work with their actors.

But the writer for the sixth group, Mann, has yet to arrive. Interestingly, his absence seems to create a sense of excitement among the rest of the team. The director and cast are plotting ways to move forward with a performance-script or no script.

At 11 am, though, Mann comes bursting into the arts center. Director Lee Kelly, a veteran member of Total Theatre, ushers him and the cast downstairs to a rehearsal space. "I'm so sorry," Mann says. "I finished at 6 in the morning and just crashed." Kelly sounds slightly disappointed that he didn't get to move forward on the group's alternative plan. "We were playing with the idea of maybe doing improv," he says.

By 11:30 am, Kelly dismisses his actors to learn lines for the script. He asks that they finish by 12:15 pm. "I want to start with the physical elements, so work on

getting off the book," Kelly says. "It's going to take some time to get the physical comedy down."

There are tricks to memorizing quickly. Some actors pay attention to key words; others like to read aloud. "The easiest way with something like this is to keep doing it over and over. It's like music. I've got to hear it," says actor Aaron Deuschle, who was faced with the 45-minute deadline to learn his lines.

There is a safety net. During the shows, a reader will be positioned just off stage. If the actors stumble, they have the option of saying "Line!" for a prompt. Or, to the dismay of the writers, "We can probably improv until we can pick it back up," says Woosley, who is busy learning his lines as Kuhn's Ego. "I'm curious to see how far off we'll be. I just don't want to be the one to blank."

The rehearsals for all the teams have the feel of group therapy sessions, with the directors sounding like therapists. "So, tell me about your character?" "Does she miss her father?" "Where is the pressure coming from?" Everyone is clutching disposable coffee cups and sitting on folding chairs in circles.

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The quick time frame also tests directors' abilities to polish performances. "The biggest challenge is keeping it from coming across to the audience as very raw," says director Adam Simon, executive director of Foolish Bison. "You want to try out the nuances in the script, but it's hard to see those when you have to read it quickly."

After a few hours of rehearsing, the team doing *Scratch Game* finishes at 3:10 pm. "Yeah, we're ready," Simon says, feet propped on a chair. "We've got good timing on a lot of it. If we repeat it too much more, it might get stale."

The production crews aren't so relaxed. Various problems are delaying the technical run-throughs—when the plays are rehearsed onstage to determine lighting and sound cues.

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*Bride of 24 Hours* producer Brant Jones welcomes the audience to the sold-out show in the 188-seat theater.

Production crew members had been in the theater until 3 am hanging lights in a general grid pattern on the 14-foot-high ceiling, and they've spent a good portion of the rest of the day adjusting the lights to fit the scripts' specific needs. Production manager Ben Rogers is in charge of all the technical aspects and also will function as a traffic cop—scheduling the moving of the set pieces and signaling the start of each play. "The challenge with this space is I barely know it," Rogers says. It doesn't help that his laptop isn't functioning correctly after it was hooked up to the arts center's older light board. So he's losing time relearning the older technology.

Throughout the day, production staff also has been working on finding set pieces. There is no budget, so it's a scavenger's game. Some items, such as chairs and tables, are found onsite; others, such as a fireplace mantle, are collected from an off-site prop- and furniture-storage area. A few things are borrowed from volunteers' homes, while two members were dispatched to libraries to find CDs for the evening's soundtracks.

At 6:10 pm, the crew is three hours behind schedule and mumblings of discontent can be heard. Then the tedious technical run-through takes longer than planned. When it's time for the sixth group, it's already 8 pm, the scheduled starting time. A decision is made to just wing it on the last play.

The front lobby, meanwhile, is bursting with patrons. When the theater's doors

open at 8:11 pm, people pour in and soon all 188 seats in the black box theater are occupied. Four minutes later, a beaming Jones addresses the audience. "Thank you all for your patience. We cheated a bit and took 24 hours *and* 15 minutes," he announces with a showman's shrug. Jones explains the concept of the show and the

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constraints everyone has worked under. "We're very tired," he says and earns a few laughs.

He leaves and the lights dim. In the darkness, harmonica music hums from the speakers. The stage lights begin to rise and an actor appears, pacing, with a cellphone to her ear.

And so *Bride of 24 Hours* begins. Will it be sweet or sour?

**T**he cast of the first play, *Scratch Game*, milks the audience for laughs, warming them up nicely for Kuhn's *The Endless Coil*, which follows; the triangle of Brunet and the two men in her life seems plausible as she veers between choosing stability or independence.

As the performances go on, it's clear that some of the actors are slipping here and there into improv, but the audience eats it up. The cast of *Down Mexico Way* excels at the slapstick comedy, although two of the actors each ask once for "Line!" the only requests all night.

It's a minor glitch in an evening of surprisingly entertaining theater. When the sixth play finishes a little before 10 pm, the applause ripples through the theater as 20 very relieved actors take a final bow. Sweet, indeed.

Earlier in the day, while activity still swirled around him, producer Jones took a minute to breathe it in. "I've been impressed by everyone's professionalism. Especially with a show like this, it could be easy to say, 'Oh, that's good enough,' and cut a few corners," he says. "But you look around and you have 30 people really watching the quality. You don't want to let everybody else down." ■

*Susan Wittstock Dalzell is a freelance writer.*