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Tenuous Connections

A New York director harnesses local talent for a high-tech embodiment of the MySpace era.

By Sam Hurwitt

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UC Berkeley's theater department is cooking up something special for the opening offering of its main stage performance season in October. Marianne Weems, artistic director of the New York-based Builders Association, has flown West to start working with students and faculty toward a work-in-progress showing of her multimedia theater group's latest project, *Continuous City*.

The Builders Association has been creating high-tech theater pieces on a staggering scale since 1994, when Weems and her collaborators constructed a full-scale three-story house lined with video and sound triggers for a version of Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Last fall at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Bay Area audiences got a much-belated introduction to the company's work with *Super Vision*, in which live actors walked through computer-graphics sets and interacted with video-projected characters, some prerecorded and some played by actors sitting at nearby computer terminals. A little boy gradually faded out of existence while his always-busy father stole his identity for a variety of credit scams. A grandmother's video image gradually fragmented in a series of Webcam conversations as her memory began to fail.

The Builders' use of multimedia may be flashy, but it's never gratuitous. Weems is interested in the implications of living in an increasingly technological world, and the plays she creates inhabit a virtual space appropriate to that. *Alladeen* in 2003 explored the disconnection of Indian call centers where customer service types learn to pass as Americans. *Super Vision* looked at our virtual profiles created by medical, credit, library, and security records, and suggested that these "data bodies" are now seen as more real by people in authority than our actual bodies.

Continuous City, meanwhile, examines a different aspect of the digitizing of human experience: how the proliferation of social-networking sites affects people's sense of place around the world. "It's about a very young girl who's at home in this gated community but also immersed in this mediascape where she communicates with her father, who's a businessman out promoting social networking in the developing world," Weems explains.

The director will spend her artist's residence at Cal mainly trying to figure out an online networking component to use in the show itself, which is untested ground not just for the Builders but for live theater in general. The idea is for people from all over the Bay Area to upload text, images, and video to a site under construction at ContinuousCity.org that will then be incorporated into the performance.

"They essentially become a Greek chorus in the show," Weems says, "as well as uploading photographs and video of their own neighborhood that will become a visual part of *Continuous City*. It's still a proscenium theater experience, but it has this porous and interactive aspect to it that is about responding to the location where the piece is actually taking place."

During *Super Vision*'s run at Yerba Buena, Weems met theater department chair Shannon Jackson, who had long followed the Builders' work and taught it in her classes. From their conversations came Weems' UC Berkeley residency, which requires people from

departments all over campus to put their heads together. Besides theater folks, she says, the project will include reps from the art practice department, the school of information, the engineering school, and "our organization for experimental music and sound." They'll have tasks that range from sound and video design to setting up the all-important computer server.

To coincide with the Zellerbach Playhouse workshop October 5 through 14, Cal will host a symposium, *Continuous Bodies — Performance, Space, and Technology*. The point of the October 12 conference is to bring together artists and scholars from various UC campuses to talk about technology's impact, not only on art but on people's basic sense of place and interpersonal connections.

What local spectators will experience is far from the finished product; it will be more of a dry run, or notes toward *Continuous City*, than the piece itself. *Continuous City*, which started over the course of a residency at the Krannert Center and National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at the beginning of this year, is still quite early in its development.

This fall and winter, the Builders plan to film in "megaslums" in Mumbai, Lagos, and Mexico City, assembling much of the actual content for the longer version. The finished show won't premiere until October 2008 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, from where it will begin a tour that might include a return to Yerba Buena.

"We have an extended development and rehearsal process for all of our shows, so this is very, very early," Weems says. "It's not going to be anything like the final performance, and I can guarantee you that it'll be total chaos. I think the best way to describe it is five or six vignettes around the idea of social networking."

It's a long way from megalums to MySpace, much as the futurati might have us believe otherwise. That's part of the point. If anything, Weems sees the gulf widening between the huddled masses yearning for a meal and the proud citizens of the global suburb. "The current myth about connectedness and ideology around networking has to do with how it can replace physical life, and how the brave new world of networking is going to bring us all closer together, which obviously is full of holes," the director says. "But it's an interesting fantasy that people are really invested in at this point."

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