

This Rorschach inkblot looks like a phoenix

October 7, 2011 by Tim Treanor (<https://dctheatrescene.com/author/tim-treanor/>)

It is 2009, and we are in the midst of a recession. A bad one. Good small theaters – Catalyst, Firebelly, Didactic, Meat and Potatoes, – are gone, swept out in a blood tide of depressed ticket sales and diminished donations. And Rorschach – the most inventive, and one of the best of them all gets it harder than most. Evicted from its cramped space in the Casa del Pueblo, it moves to Georgetown University, where it can produce only in the summer. And then it stops producing there.

It's gone. Or is it?



(<https://dctheatrescene.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/rorschach1.png>)

Jenny McConnell Frederick and Randy Baker
(Photos courtesy of Rorschach Theatre)

“You see, we had to take a step back ... and examine our success. And not all success; you know, the little hiccups along the way as well,” says Randy Baker, who, with

Jenny McConnell Frederick, is the theater's co-Artistic Director. He is sitting in an outdoor café, a tall young man with an amused expression and pale russet hair, eating chili. He looks comfortable, as a man who had just landed a year's lease at the Atlas on a revenue-sharing basis should look.

With the exception of a brief run at NCD of *Voices Underwater* last March, the nearly eighteen month hiatus that Rorshach took from producing was not compelled by panic. “We weren’t in debt; there was nothing wrong. We just really wanted to step back and decide where we wanted to go from here. We had been doing it a long time, a lot of other theaters had grown up along the way, some theaters maybe even started to sound a little like us, but we just really wanted to ... look at where we were going. And the simple answer is that we spent the next year and a half deciding what we wanted to do. And then we jumped in and started doing it.”

Baker views with equanimity what appeared to most of us on the outside as a series of terrible accidents that happened to the company. After a few productions in found space during the company’s infancy – Baker cheerfully recalls a production “where Jenny’s dad actually came in and built walls out of garbage bags” – the company settled down in the sanctuary of a Methodist church in Columbia Heights.

“Let’s see, you’ve got the altar, and the choir loft, and we did *Lord of the Flies* there. And our thought was just that that was going to be the space where we did that [production]. Then we just ended up staying there. A lot of it was the Church was not very organized, and they – I think they just never got around to telling us to leave. “



(<https://dctheatrescene.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/rorschach3.jpg>)

Scene from *The Birds*, 2007 (Photo: Marigan O'Malley Posada)

They did eventually – after Rorschach had invested in a new floor and an expensive lighting system. “It was a little troubling that it happened mid-season,” Baker admits. “We [had done] *Kit Marlowe*, and just as that was closing, they said, ‘so, we need our space back.’ And at that point we were on a month-to-month, we had not actually got the annual thing, and so we had no recourse whatsoever, and we were out on the streets.”

The Church had decided to use the space to produce their own plays – church plays. How’d that work out for them?

“The crazy thing is, that church does not exist any more,” Baker says. “Somehow it went under, and we’ve actually called the main Methodist Washington-area [office] to see if we could get the whole building back from them or something, but they...I don’t know. I think they think it would be too much of a liability to have us in there.”

Rorschach decamped and moved to Georgetown. Since the University’s theater department used its multiple stages for educational purposes during the year, Rorschach had to squeeze its season into the summer. Did such a foreshortened season strangle the company’s ticket sales?

“Well, surprisingly, we talk about the economy falling out, and we were really worried, but our ticket sales were quite good.” In fact, the four-play summer season at Georgetown sold as many tickets as the year-round four-play season sold at Casa del Pueblo. “Maybe it was because at Georgetown we had a different audience,” Baker speculates. “We did one show in a big space, too. So that you had the ability to generate more ticket income [from] that as well.”

Vintage Rorschach



(<https://dctheatrescene.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/rorschach4.png>)

(clockwise from left top) This Storm Is What We Call Progress (2008), Living Dead in Denmark (2009), Kit Marlowe (2007) and References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot (2007)

Rorschach thrived at Georgetown. “You know, they’re beautiful spaces. The folks at Georgetown are amazing people, and it had a very sort of summer-camp feel, four shows going on at once, one show rehearsing, two shows performing, lots and lots of artists around all the time. Very exciting.”

So why did they leave? “Essentially, we wanted to not be producing theater only in the summer. We’d rather produce year-round. So that’s what we did.”

There were other considerations. Both Baker and Frederick wanted an opportunity to grow as artists. “Jenny started producing the Source Festival (<http://www.sourcedc.org/sourcefestival/index.html>)[which runs in June], so that made it impossible ..” to produce Rorschach during the summer.

And Baker had decided to pursue his MFA in playwriting. He enrolled in Goddard College, in rural Plainfield, Vermont.

“It is a low-residency program,” he explains. “Essentially you go in residence for about two weeks every semester, and the rest of the semester is spent wherever you are.” The concept is ideal for a writing program, Baker says. “You’re pretty much one-on-one with a single advisor. And so essentially every three weeks there’s a packet of information...based on what you sent. So it’s critical and creative.”

But in addition to giving Baker and Frederick an opportunity to grow professionally, the producing hiatus gave Rorschach an opportunity to take stock and decide what it could be. “[We] went through consultation of our Board, and of our company, our artistic company, and sort of just the friends of Rorschach.... We had a retreat...where we...talked about what is a good Rorschach play, and we talked about what worked well over the years, and what maybe didn’t, what defines a Rorschach production, and absolutely, out of this discussion came a sort of very clear path forward.”

What was that path? “We are looking to do entirely new [plays].” Not necessarily world premieres but “living playwrights, recently produced plays, and that is different. Because we’ve done lots of classics over the years, and had a good time doing it. But in addition to doing new plays, we want to do a very particular type of new play, that actually is informed by our past.

And we want to do new plays that are essentially new acts of magic realism. That might be too narrow of a category. But works that are at the same time now and relevant but are also epic and magical and supernatural – you know, these places where the world meets, where the past meets the present, and dream meets reality, and timeless meets relevance.”

Plays like, for example, *After the Quake*, which opens on Monday. “Haruki Murakami (http://www.murakami.ch/main_5.html) (who wrote the short stories from which the play is adapted)...seems to have an almost Harry Potter-like following, not in the amount of people who love him but in the intensity with which they do,” Baker enthuses. The play weaves together two stories from Murakami’s

collection of the same name. “It’s just how disasters somehow seep into the DNA of everything we do. And affect us in small and remarkable ways,” says Baker. “It tells the story of a man trying to heal a broken little girl, who’s haunted by these images of the earthquake, and in trying to heal her, he actually has to look within himself. And find out what’s broken in himself. And what’s broken in himself is a very personal love story between himself and the mother of this child. He’s a writer, and he writes short stories, and one of the stories he’s working on is ‘Superfrog Saves Tokyo.’” which becomes the second story.

“Underneath all the fun, exciting magic that’s taking place, there’s a very real story about personal heartbreak, and about what we do in the wake of these disasters,” Baker says about the company’s season opener. “And so I think it’s a really lovely mix of all those things. In a way I think only (Murakami) can do...His voice is so unique. And that’s why he’s so popular.”

Baker is just as animated about the company’s second offer, *The Gallerist*. (The third show hasn’t been selected yet.) “It will be a world premiere by this terrific playwright, Fenger Gael...It’s this crazy story that takes place in the present and the past, takes place in pre-World War I England and there’s a woman who’s gone crazy and she’s killed all these animals in this bestiary, and her friend comes, and the only way she can heal her friend...is by releasing the spirits of these dead animals, and the only way she can do it is by painting them...But there’s this one spirit that won’t leave, and it’s this evil monkey, who’s taken a hold of the soul of this woman. And in the present, there’s this gallery owner who’s found this painting of this monkey, and it, too, is beginning to affect him. So it’s a story of possession.” He hopes to commission original paintings, and perhaps sell them afterward.

Sounds like a Rorschach story, doesn’t it?

So how did Rorschach, which is so used to producing in found spaces or cramped quarters or in time-limited venues, land a space in the capacious Atlas? According to Baker, he made a sweet deal.

“While we were making a decision [about what sort of space to use], Sam Sweet approached us, and they were looking for partners to produce [at Atlas]. And they weren’t looking for renters. They were looking for actual partner organizations.” Atlas and Rorschach entered into a revenue-sharing agreement. “And they are marketing our show, and we’re marketing Atlas.”

It is, Baker avers, a cool space. “Lab-2” – the smaller, upstairs theater “is terrific,” he says, marketing Atlas. “We’re actually making some changes to Lab-2. I can’t believe they’re letting us do this, but we’re bringing more power in there, we’re moving dimmers in there so that more lights can be in there...there’s all sorts of crazy things. But everything is changing around there. And it’s a black box, but it’s the same size as the Divine Theater, at Georgetown. And it’s square, which is nice. And for the show we’re doing right now, it’s perfect. Perfect size.” Starting in winter of 2012, he says, they will be doing some shows in the larger space on the first floor.

There’s parking across the street and “I tell you, H Street, it’s changing...It looks great” And best of all, Rorschach’s lease runs at least through August.

Baker thinks back to the days when Rorschach was just a concept, *in utero*. “I was working at Theater J at the time, and... we were always having late-night meetings, because we were all doing way too many things, and the only time we could meet was 12.30 at night. And I remember Ari Roth actually coming into the theater one night we were there at midnight or something and he called us the cockroach theater, because we scurried around and only came out at night. And it was funny, because it was true at the time, but it’s also funny because of how manifest it became, in the way we have sort of out-survived all our peers, in the way that cockroaches will survive Armageddon.”

After the Quake opens Oct 10 and runs thru Nov 6, 2011 at Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H Street NE, Washington, DC.

[Details and tickets](#)

[\(http://www.rorschachtheatre.com/events/after-the-quake/\)](http://www.rorschachtheatre.com/events/after-the-quake/)



About Tim Treanor

Tim Treanor is a senior writer for DC Theatre Scene. He is a 2011 Fellow of the National Critics Institute and has written over 700 reviews for

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Comments



Roy Englert says

October 8, 2011 at 11:22 am

(<https://dctheatrescene.com/2011/10/07/this-rorschach-inkblot-looks-like-a-phoenix/#comment-18727>)

I am glad to hear that Rorschach is back, and I will try to see the company's shows. Rorschach's production of J.B. several years ago was outstanding in my judgment, even though hardly anyone saw it. I have enjoyed other Rorschach shows as well — and disliked a couple — but J.B. is the one that really stands out in my memory.

Much of the best work being done in the Washington area these days, in my estimation, is being done by small companies. I am a fan of Constellation and Synetic in particular. I was a fan of Catalyst before its demise. I hope DC theatergoers will support the work of such small companies.

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