

Contemporary American Theater Festival's 5-Ring Circus



Margaret Ivey, Nafeesa Monroe, Damian Thompson, and the cast of "The Wedding Gift" by Chisa Hutchinson at the Contemporary American Theater Festival. (Photo by Seth Freeman)

How this West Virginia new-play fest builds and rides an annual new-play repertory carousel.

By [Allison Considine](#)

"1, 2, 3!" came the yell, and a small army of interns, technical staff, and costume apprentices lifted the front end of a futuristic-looking set. Behind them, its undulating, marbled walls flew up into the fly system and a brick wall descended in its place. "Table coming through!" piped in another voice as a dining table and four chairs were whisked onstage. A living room quickly appeared downstage, light fixtures were lowered above a kitchen counter, and an assembly line of stage workers formed to place books on a shelf and dress a domestic setting.

In less than an hour, the Frank Center at the [Contemporary American Theater Festival](#)

(CATF) had made the changeover from the dystopic cityscape of Chisa Hutchinson's *The Wedding Gift* to the enviable Manhattan apartment of the day's second play, Susan Miller's *20th Century Blues*.

Down the hill on the campus of Shepherd University, the home of CATF in Shepherdstown, W.Va., a group was unfolding a large sail on the grass; it would hang above the set for Christina Anderson's *pen/man/ship*. Outside the Marinoff Theater, set pieces from Ronan Noone's *The Second Girl* were stacked in custom-built crates with casters and rolled from the performance space into an adjacent storage space, giving patrons a peek at the Tetris-like process of changing over the repertory sets. Inside, the technical staff disconnected a water pump from a working faucet and farm sink, and wheeled a potbelly stove out of the onstage kitchen. The floor was then lifted, and the underlying pool of water was refilled in preparation for the evening's performance of *pen/man/ship*. "They've got it down to 39 minutes," CATF founder and producing director Ed Herendeen said with a smile.

These breakneck set changeovers were orchestrated with such precision, they seemed like they must be a well-worn routine. In fact, this was just the festival's opening weekend (this year's ran July 8-31). Each summer, CATF mounts five contemporary plays in three performance venues at Shepherd University. A deluge of loyal patrons descends on the quaint town in the month of July, eager to experience them all—and many of them do it in the span of 48 hours, as I did.

It's a virtual whirlwind of theatre activity, and each year it starts on one man's desk. Long before set pieces are built and tickets are purchased, Herendeen culls through a multitude of submissions to curate the season; this past year, he narrowed it down from more than 100 scripts.

"I never pick a theme, but the plays always start to talk with one another," said Herendeen, who has led the festival since its inception in 1991. Correlations could certainly be found among the works this season: plays inspired by classic dramatic literature, two slave narratives, a preponderance of female playwrights (four out of five). He attributes some of the resonance among them to the fact that "the plays were written within one or two years" of each other. He also said he's cultivated relationships with literary agents who understand his taste for plays: As he put it, they have to hit him in the gut.

After winnowing down his pile of gut-punching works each fall, Herendeen shares the selected season with CATF's five full-time staffers; the lineup is officially announced in

January.

“Ed is a magical curating elf,” writer Hutchinson said, laughing. “He is the bravest artistic director I know. It’s really encouraging to see that there are people like that in positions who can usher in new plays and support playwrights in that unconditional way. It is refreshing.”

Ronan Noone shares the appreciation for Herendeen’s backing. He said he was grateful for “the opportunity to get *The Second Girl* into a second production—which is not an easy thing to get—and be able to rebuild it from the previous production” at Boston’s [Huntington Theatre Company](#) last year. He joked that Herendeen’s “middle name is ‘whatever the playwright wants.’”

Allison Gregory counted herself thrilled that her play *Not Medea*, which is in the midst of a [National New Play Network](#) rolling world premiere, would also be part of the CATF season. “I have made changes to what could work better,” said Gregory. “Having the luxury of having one production right after another in a completely different context has helped the play, and me, immensely.”

Though CATF is every bit a new-play festival, it doesn’t necessarily define “new” as “world premiere,” as three out of this year’s offerings had a previous production. The other two were being seen onstage for the first time: Miller’s *20th Century Blues* and Hutchinson’s *The Wedding Gift* (the latter didn’t take long to score another production, as it’s now at Seattle’s [Forward Flux Productions](#) Sept. 20-Oct. 8).

It’s not Hutchinson’s first CATF world premiere: *Dead and Breathing* bowed there in 2014; it since went on to be published and will appear in London next season. She confessed she was “surprised that Ed wanted to do *The Wedding Gift*, because I thought it was too weird to live.” Hutchinson’s play follows Doug, a time traveler from today, who finds himself at a wedding in the distant, non-English-speaking future—and he’s the titular gift.

Christina Anderson is no CATF newbie either; her play *The Ashes Under Gait City* debuted at CATF in 2014. After having its first staging at [Magic Theatre](#) in San Francisco and then coming to CATF, *pen/man/ship* will be produced at Oregon’s [Portland Playhouse](#) later this season (Feb. 8-March 5, 2017).

In short, it’s clear that CATF, which puts playwrights at the center of the action, is one of the nation’s preeminent festival-based new-play springboards, rivaled only by Actors Theatre of Louisville’s [Humana Festival of New American Plays](#) and the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s [National Playwrights Conference](#). Though Herendeen called this

summer's offerings "a signature season, pretty typical for CATF," the program is atypical for summer theatre, not only for its location—in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia, roughly 75 miles from the D.C. metro area—but for the way it puts edgy new plays through the repertory wringer.



Lighting designer Tony Galaska (center), master electrician Bridget Williams, master electrician John Newman, master electrician George Horrocks, and electric intern Adam Neely in the Marinoff Theater. (Photo by Hunter Strauch)

The repertory model has been in place since the festival's founding in 1991, when the university granted the fledgling company a limited amount of time to use the space. As Herendeen wanted to fit as many plays as possible into his allotted time slot, he saw repertory as the best way to multitask.

It's not a simple turnkey operation, though. CATF's repertory is kept in motion with the aforementioned small army—this year's included a group of 42 interns, a management team, a design team, and a company of actors with all hands on deck that kept the ship in motion. A key player in this effort was Therese Bruck, who designed costumes for both *The Second Girl* and *20th Century Blues*, and who first worked for the festival in its early

days. Since then, she noted, theatres working on a repertory model have dwindled.

“The interns here are learning the craft and getting to see what very few theatres actually do anymore, which is the rep and the changeovers that occur, and the thought process that goes into those changeovers,” said Bruck. “It’s a rare thing, it doesn’t happen many places—it is a huge undertaking.”

Bruck previously worked on the national tour of Blue Man Group, where she watched sets unload out of 10 trucks and into huge hockey arenas, then get packed back up again. “But I have to be honest,” she said, “that pales in comparison to what happens here, because they literally pick everything up and reset for a completely different show in an hour.”

As playwright Noone put it, “One play is collaborative. Five plays is just...I don’t know if there is a word for it.”

CATF’s five full-time staffers were joined by the company management team in May, who arranged housing for the 130 company members—the largest number the festival has ever hosted—and prepared a “welcome” picnic. The time leading up to the rehearsal period and the welcome events can be the most complicated stretch for the company management team. The picnic itself was the biggest CATF event of the summer, as the entire company, board, honorary board, trustees, community members, and friends of CATF all gathered on campus to kick off the 26th season. “This year we planned for 350 people, and that was pretty accurate,” said festival company manager and events coordinator Samantha Cotton. “It’s a big crew!”

Next came rehearsals, which started with a reading of four of the season’s plays at the beginning of June. Herendeen said that the company read-through is his favorite day in the whole process.

“The entire company—technicians, designers, admin staff, PR people—we all come in the room together with some of our supporters and board members,” he said. “It really demonstrates the journey we are about to embark on; it is looking at the whole picture.”

Bruck agreed, calling the reading a rewarding experience for the company, especially the young artists in the room. “They get to listen to all the plays, watch them mounted, and then see them realized. As an emerging theatre artist, that is just amazing.”

The rehearsal process began around a table, and for some casts, rehearsals stayed around a table until tech week. As *pen/man/ship*, for instance, is a text-heavy show, much of the rehearsal period was spent working through the words. “Lucie [Tiberghien] is a

great director because she invests in table work," said Anderson, "and I'm grateful that we took that time to work with the text."

For *The Second Girl*, Noone came for the first five days of rehearsals to work around the table, meet the design team and cast, and share his ideas before leaving for a few weeks. He wanted "to allow them to get the play into their souls." Because the play requires onstage food preparation, cooking, and dishwashing, some of the rehearsal period was dedicated to learning the kitchen blocking.

"What was so wonderful about the stage business was being able to use it," said Cathryn Wake, who portrayed the character of Cathleen, a maid in the household of the Tyrones of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—Noone's play envisions the same setting, but from the kitchen staff's point of view. "By a thwack of a spoon or a platter slammed onto the table, we could use the business to further a point. To hide, to sweep something under the rug only to have the other uncover it again, ensured a unique performance every night. No two performances could ever be the same." The kitchen rehearsals also ensured that the first two rows of audience members would experience the waft of sizzling bacon in the theatre.

This season, four shows shared performance spaces (*Not Medea* had the campus's small theatre to itself for the whole run), and only one cast was completely repped across two shows—an unusual happenstance because of the unique casting needs for *20th Century Blues* (more on that below). But for the shows in full repertory mode, rehearsals were cut in half, at four hours each day for a given play, which could feel like a damper for directors and playwrights.

"Every time we got going and had momentum, it was the end of our rehearsal time," lamented Anderson. "It was shocking."

For the double-cast actors, the rehearsal period felt more like a marathon. Margaret Ivey, who juggled leading roles in *pen/man/ship* and *The Wedding Gift*, credited her ability to sustain the long rehearsals and two-show days to crock-pot meals and naps.

As arduous as the rep model is, Herendeen has done a fair share of troubleshooting over the years and willingly greets challenges head-on. This year, the casting for *20th Century Blues* called for four women in their late 50s and early 60s—an age group not represented in any of the other shows. Thus, the show was not a good fit for repertory casting, let alone the allocated Equity budget, but Herendeen felt it was a play that needed to be seen by CATF audiences. So after sharing the script with the board, a group of women formed the Staging Committee and raised an additional \$30,000 so the piece could be produced.

“My experience here is just enhanced by these people who love the play,” said Miller, the work’s author, who led discussions about the play with those additional sponsors.

The challenges of rep can also be physical. Anderson’s *pen/man/ship* follows a father and his son as they journey to Liberia in 1896 on a ship for a mysterious mission. “The ship is the fifth character of the play, and the ocean is the sixth character,” said Anderson. When she relayed that to set designer Kris Stone and director Tiberghien, the two landed on an idea to bring the world of her play to the Marinoff Theater—by having the actors perform in a pool of water onstage.

“Of course we were willing to do it, but you can imagine already what that means to the rep of the other show and the madness of how that really works,” said Peggy McKowen, associate producing director. “But it seemed like such a great way to tell this story that we all knew we just had to figure it out.”

Because the show played in rep with Ronan Noone’s *The Second Girl*, the space had to be made to fit both narratives. “For me that is the excitement,” said Herendeen, who directed *The Second Girl*. “One of the great metaphors that Ronan is using is that the Tyrone kitchen is a sweatbox; it is where the servants work. So we literally plop this kitchen in the middle of a pool, on a deck.”

Another hurdle of the season was less easily jumped. *The Wedding Gift*’s otherworldly setting required 35 costumes (complete with additional headpieces, hoop skirts, and platform shoes), more than 150 sound cues, and 120 lighting cues. “Our stage manager was joking that she actually has more text than the actors,” laughed Nathan A. Roberts, one of the show’s sound designers.

Aside from the lead, Doug, all characters in the play speak a language concocted by Hutchinson. Cast member Nafeesa Monroe put together a glossary of words to help her and her castmates memorize lines. “One of the things I need to keep reminding myself is that some of my lines are actual cues for tech—they need to hear the right word out of my mouth,” said Monroe with a laugh.

Lighting designer D.M. Wood, who has worked at CATF for nine seasons, also found the production timeline for the show challenging. “It was a real dash this year,” she said. “*The Wedding Gift* is an incredibly demanding show, just in the structure of the piece. I worked through all the previews until they took the table away, which I’ve never done before.”

A mad dash also took place in the costume shop, where community members volunteered to help finish hemming the costumes for the show the day before the 10-out-of-12 tech

rehearsals began. But the hard work paid off in creating the alternate universe the playwright imagined.

“This is hands-down the best set I’ve ever had, and maybe the most beautiful set I’ve ever seen. Period,” raved Hutchinson about David M. Barber’s design. “And it is lit beautifully—it is like a different set whenever the lights change.”



A volunteer in the costume shop. (Photo by Hunter Strauch)

The community of Shepherdstown is integral to making the festival possible every summer, with businesses and restaurants preparing for the influx of CATF company members and attendees in the town, whose population is just over 2,000. An Alpine-style resort atop the bluff of the Potomac River opened its infinity pool for CATF staffers, offering a relaxing atmosphere for their rare free time throughout the rehearsal and performance period. The resort, steps away from Shepherd University, also hosted an opening-night party for the company.

Deb Tucker, who owns Bistro 112 on the town’s main drag, German Street, spends the months leading up to the festival preparing for CATF. She hires additional employees just

for the month of July, coordinates the restaurant's hours with the festival showtimes, and stocks up on martini glasses.

"There are a lot of small businesses and restaurants that are sole proprietors here in town, so it is a lot of work to host as the sort of additional hands that are helping to make the festival a success," Tucker said. "But it is well worth our while; we make a lot of good money which we can bank. We never make the register rings in July in any other month."

Tucker isn't just eyeing her restaurant's bottom line, though; she also sees the plays as early in the season as she can—all the better to converse with patrons about the festival. "People love to talk about theatre," she said, obviously including herself. On opening weekend, she even kept the restaurant open late for a pair of couples talking about *pen/man/ship* long after the servers clocked out.

The tagline for the festival is "Think theatre," and indeed, the fully immersed patrons follow that directive. "You eat, sleep, and drink five new American plays," said Herendeen. "You're talking theatre and thinking about theatre for a 72-hour period. The entire community is absolutely held captive in many ways by the work. The shop owners, the merchants are engaged in what is happening in these venues."

In fact, Joey Parsons, who played the lead in *Not Medea*, said she had to factor in extra time to get to the theatre each day because patrons were eager to stop her on the street to talk about the show. And it's not just onstage personnel who get recognized. As Christina Anderson put it, "Our pictures are in the CATF brochure; I can't go to town for a cup of coffee without being stopped to talk about my play."

For her part, Chisa Hutchinson said she welcomed the "oasis of progressive thinking" in the town. "Everyone is really open to discussion," she said. "There are lots of free-thinking people who respond to art as art."

Patrons don't just converse about the festival's plays; they share honest opinions. "It has been surprising and refreshing to have audience members tell you *exactly* what they thought of each play, with no reservations," said actor Margaret Ivey. In addition to the conversations around town, CATF offers breakfast sessions with Herendeen, panel discussions with the design team, lecture series with the playwrights, and talkbacks for each of the plays throughout the festival.

Said Herendeen, "We are outside the glare of the urban spotlight—the festival is more than 70 miles from Washington, D.C., and 80 miles from the Baltimore area," he said. "It really gives us the freedom to create the work that we want to do." Last year, he said,

patrons traveled from 37 states, and several repeat visitors have been creating a kind of Brigadoon-like community over the ensuing years.

Of course, being far from the big city has its drawbacks too. “It’s tough not having access to everything our company members are used to and trying to make them feel at home in semi-rural West Virginia when they’re coming from Manhattan,” conceded festival company manager and events coordinator Samantha Cotton. This year the company management team spent hours shuttling back and forth between the train station in Harper’s Ferry and the Baltimore airport to retrieve visiting company members.

The costume shop can also log several miles just collecting the necessary fabric and sewing material. When a laundry mishap left a white gown for *Not Medea* discolored, it took trips to multiple stores to find just seven yards of the fabric. The dress was completely rebuilt just in time for the first preview—a costume apprentice handed it to the lead performer in the wings moments before its debut onstage.

Throughout the hustle and bustle of tech week leading into previews, the company management team kept the morale afloat by feeding the company meals between rehearsals and evening notes sessions. The company staff worked around the clock cooking, picking up, and transporting food to the campus. Sydney Hill, a company management intern, picked up trays of mac-and-cheese and boxes containing 175 pieces of chicken from a local restaurant for one of the meals. When a chili recipe went awry, Cotton resorted to plan B: She called Domino’s and said, “Hi, I’m having a bit of a food emergency, do you think you could crank out 40 pizzas for me in the next hour?”

She didn’t leave it at that: She and Kurt Engh, another company management intern, hopped behind the counter to help Domino’s employees furiously fold pizza boxes while they anxiously awaited the pies. Exclaimed Cotton, “We laughed through the entire event—it was actually kind of fun. Theatre magic!”

At a company barbecue after the shows all opened, complete with games of cornhole and a photo booth, the team presented the steadfast company management crew with gift certificates for massages in return for all their theatre magic.



Margaret Ivey and Brian D. Coats in "pen/man/ship" by Christina Anderson at Contemporary American Theater Festival. (Photo by Seth Freeman)



Alexandra Neil, Kathryn Grody, Betsy Aidem, and Franchelle Stewart Dorn in Susan Miller's *20th Century Blues*. (Photo by Seth Freeman)

Even after the design teams and playwrights left Shepherdstown following opening weekend, the magic continued. CATF hosted 25 high school students in the Shepherd University residence halls. For two weeks, the students attended workshops and classes and learned about the process of creating theatre and mounting a festival. CATF also welcomed members of the [Dramatists Guild Fund](#) and partnered with local schools to offer educational opportunities.

After the shows closed, general manager Joshua Midgett counted 2,500 ticket buyers for a total of 14,000 ticket sales for the season. And while the festival may be outside the glare of the urban spotlight, its fare is open for review, and big-city papers were among the visiting throng.

"Ronan Noone achieves his own feat of boldness with *The Second Girl*, this year's most polished work," wrote [Celia Wren in *The Washington Post*](#). She praised *Not Medea* as "a resonant meditation on guilt, alienation, resilience, and double standards for men and women." In [DC Theatre Scene](#), [Debbie Minter Jackson](#) wrote that Anderson's

pen/man/ship “connects complicated concepts, interweaving them throughout the course of her script. The effect is a fascinating interconnection of issues that usually are not addressed together.”

And before the five full-time staffers could catch their breath or reminisce about the season after the stage strikes, they were back to work preparing grants, renewing stewards, and preparing for next summer.

“We have plans to increase international traffic,” said Herendeen. “We want to put into place funding and grants that would allow us to export our work internationally, and to import international audiences.” And with plans to begin a capital campaign to build a fourth performance space at Shepherd University, the company isn’t just thinking theatre—they are thinking big.

Will having another space take some of the pressure off the CATF production staff? Possibly, but not likely: Herendeen said he hopes it will allow them to add another two shows to the repertory.

The repertory spirit of CATF is contagious not only with the production staff and the actors but among the writers as well.

“It is rare as a playwright to be consulted so early on in the process about design, and to be included in that process has really been a treat,” said Allison Gregory. “This design team has been very keen to the emotional landscape of the play. This is the exact show that I wanted it to be, and that doesn’t always happen.”

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