

# THREE DIRECTORS' VIEWS

## DAN BONNELL'S *HEADLESS*

By Tom Provenzano

AS BASEBALL AND APPLE PIE REPRESENTED the happy face of American culture in the first half of the last century, there was also a creepy underbelly that had its most impressive exhibition in the “freak shows” that darkly accompanied carnivals and circuses. Disturbing but captivating human anomalies, now cheerfully labeled “differently abled,” made their ways through the world by showing off what were then known as “deformities.” The psychological fascination with these “freaks” has long been exploited in literature and drama, a tradition continuing in Lea Floden’s play *Headless*, which opens May 19 at the Electric Lodge in Venice.

Originally a screenplay, this story of a rich but eccentric young man who becomes entangled with a carnival’s mysterious “headless woman,” falling headlong into the dark world of the side show, caught the attention of Barry Hunt, artistic director of Portland’s Sowelu Theater Ensemble. Hunt and Floden, who had worked together at New York’s Circle Rep, developed the screenplay for the stage. Dan Bonnell, another alumnus from Circle Rep, was captivated by the stage version created by his former colleagues. He brought it to Los Angeles, where he has successfully staked out territory as co-artistic director (with Laura Jane Salvato) of the Ensemble Studio Theatre-LA, one of the southland’s leading developers of new dramas.

Bonnell explains, “The storytelling is cryptic and non-linear, almost hallucinatory. There is some narration—an interesting Greek Chorus overtone of voices and images that are like a modern day version of *The Furies*. It’s a very interesting story mode, so the design style needs to be simple and evocative. At the same time it has to have this kind of gritty naturalism but with heightened magic that captures the romance of carnivals where nothing is really what it seems to be. It is very cinematic. It has a dark swarthy edge and at the same time a real true emotional connection.”

Bonnell came to LA from New York to break into television as a director. He had many friends directing top 10 network shows and found

himself shadowing them with the hope of landing his own series. He sighs, “I never got the break. Then after sitting and watching other people work for a year and a half I realized I really didn’t want to do it any more. So I spent a couple years playing in a rock and roll band—a classic LA midlife crisis.”

Finally, his long experience as a director in New York and in regional theatres across the country paid off here. Earlier this year Bonnell directed a production of *Anatol* at the Pacific Resident Theatre, where he was very impressed with that company’s artistic director Marilyn Fox. “She was very helpful, one of those artistic directors whose notes you actually want to take. I am a fairly egoless guy. I believe the best idea in the room wins. If she brings insight to a piece I am not seeing and makes it work I am all the happier. I ultimately get the credit for it!

“I moved out here and had a plan that didn’t quite work out the way I wanted but in all respects I am actually happy. I love directing theatre, love working as artistic director of the Ensemble. I’ve spent my career developing new plays and that’s primarily what we do. Being able to do that and shepherd an organization with a strong history in new play and ensemble type work is close to my heart.”

He was recently added to the faculty of UCLA where he directs MFA projects and teaches advanced acting. “UCLA gives me a little bit of income and I love working with students. I feel the most centered I have been in a long time.”

## SCOTT CUMMINS' *BUG*

By Julio Martinez

DIRECTOR SCOTT CUMMINS FEELS FAIRLY SAFE calling Tracy Letts’ Obie Award-winning hit off-Broadway stage play, *Bug*, a comedy. “It is as much a comedy as you can get when the characters’ objectives include a lot of fighting and setting people on fire,” he muses. “There is so much going on in this play but when it all works, it is highly comedic...in a sordid kind of way.”

Letts certainly knows his way around sordid. A resident member of Chicago-based Steppenwolf, Letts made his debut with *Killer Joe*, a searing trailer trash saga which originally premiered at the Next Theatre in Chicago and ran Off-Broadway in 1998.

“I directed the LA premiere of *Killer Joe* for Lost Angels Theatre Company [four 2005 Ovation Awards included Best Direction and Best Production], so I am pretty steeped in Tracy’s mindset,” says Cummins. “There are so many levels of reality at play that have to be realized but his work is so performable.”

GOOGIE FRANKLIN



### HEADLESS

Opens May 19;  
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;  
Sun., 3 pm; through June 24  
Tickets: \$20-\$25  
Previews: May 17-18  
Electric Lodge  
1416 Electric Ave., Venice  
213.368.9552 or  
www.EnsembleStudioTheatreLA.org  
Free on-site parking

MICHAEL HELMS



*Bug* was originally produced in London and then went on to New York, garnering The Lucille Lortel and Obie Awards and a *NY Times* Top 10 of 2004. “It took Laura Niemi of Lost Angels two years to get the rights but everything is in place now,” adds Cummins. Featuring a five-member cast that includes Niemi, Amy Landecker (from the off-Broadway production), Andrew Elvis Miller, Andrew Hawkes and Rob Nagle, *Bug* runs at the Coast Playhouse through June 3.

Set in a seedy Oklahoma City motel room, *Bug* focuses on the evolving relationship between a divorced, cocaine-addicted, anti-social waitress and a soft-spoken Gulf War drifter introduced to her by her lesbian friend. She attempts to balance her growing attraction to him with her all-too-real fear of her physically abusive ex-husband, just released from prison. Complicating everything is an infestation of bugs with an agenda of its own.

“This is a brutal love story, set in the lower depths of society,” says Cummins. “Yet, it is impossible not to get deeply involved with these people. Even at its most harrowing, the action compels the audience to stay focused.”

During his life in the theatre, Cummins has been involved in over 60 productions throughout the United States either as an actor, director and/or fight choreographer. *Bug* is Cummins’ seventh directorial outing in LA. His local credits include *Mr. Kolpert* and *Moonlight and Magnolias*, both at The Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, The Road Theatre production of Ann Noble’s *The Pagans* (ADA Award Best Ensemble, ADA nomination Best Direction) and *Bright Ideas* with Morgan Productions.

As an actor, Cummins appeared in *Lobby Hero* at the Odyssey (Ovation nomination supporting actor) and *Waving Goodbye* with Syzygy Theatre. While in Chicago (where he was born and raised), he worked for such companies as The Goodman

Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Company, The Next Theatre, The Organic Theatre, Famous Door Theatre, Apple Tree Theatre, Prop Theatre and Powertap Productions.

“I enjoy moving back and forth between disciplines,” Cummins says. “I love the process of developing a directorial point of view, in collaboration with the writer and the cast, and molding a production but it is so demanding and exhausting. Being an actor is great. It is so freeing to concentrate on developing and performing a single character and let someone else be responsible for shaping the work.”

One of the main reasons Cummins was more than ready to put on his director’s cap was the opportunity to work once again with Lost Angels. “This is one of the most cutting edge theatre companies in LA,” Cummins affirms. “And the cast and design team are first rate. I think we’ve got something really special.”

## CHIL KONG’S MIKADO

By Julio Martinez

WHEN LODESTONE THEATRE ENSEMBLE Co-Artistic Director Chil Kong dwells on the reality his company is taking on Gilbert & Sullivan’s 19th century monument to ethnic socio/political incorrectness, *The Mikado*, he bursts out laughing. “I really can’t imagine any modern day company doing it,” he says, “especially Lodestone.”

It does seem incongruous. Founded in 1999 by Philip W. Chung, Alexandra Chun, Chil Kong and Tim Lounibos, Lodestone is committed to providing a forum for Asian American artists in all aspects of the theatre arts. It seeks to challenge limited perceptions of Asian Americans through the creation of original theatrical productions as well as a fresh retelling of established works.

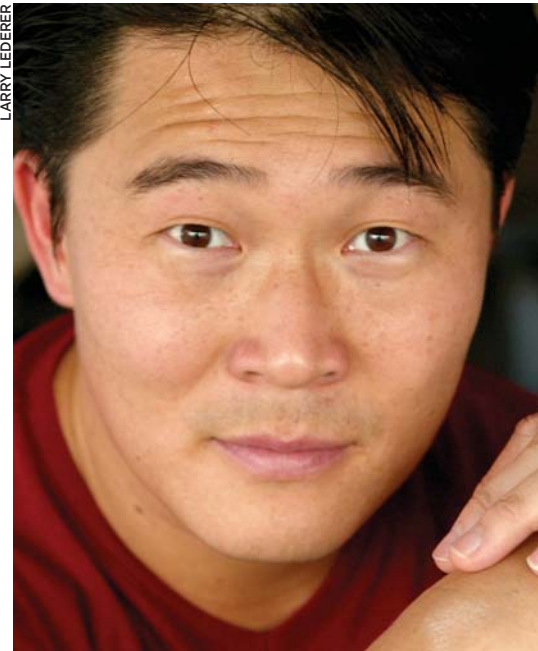
“I guess this comes under the category of a fresh retelling,” quips Kong who is directing. “Actually, *The Mikado Project* is an original play by Doris Baizley and Ken Narasaki about a struggling Asian American theatre company forced to do *The Mikado*. In the process of deconstructing the original work and creating their own politicized version, the individual members of the company must face their own personal demons as well as interpersonal problems, sexual/political issues and production

*continued on p. 29*

## BUG

Continues Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 3 pm; through June 3  
 Tickets: \$34.95  
 Coast Playhouse  
 8325 Santa Monica Blvd.,  
 West Hollywood  
 866.811.4111 or  
[www.buginla.com](http://www.buginla.com)

LARRY LEDERER



## THE MIKADO PROJECT

Continues Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 3 pm; through May 20  
 Tickets: \$15 (matinees pay what you can)  
 GTC Burbank,  
 George Izay Park  
 1111-B W. Olive Ave., Burbank  
 323.993.7245 or  
[www.nohoartsdistrict.com](http://www.nohoartsdistrict.com)