

# Saving Their Tales

by Valerie Work

## Polybe & Seats' Take on Mermaids, Bake Sales and Brooklyn

Marine biologists are the new rock stars," proclaim Jessica Brater and Katya Schapiro, Artistic Director and Artistic Associate of Brooklyn-based theater company Polybe & Seats. Both are clearly excited about their company's newest project, which will encompass ocean conservation and mermaids.

Several years ago, Brater read a story in the New York Times concerning a mermaid theme park in Florida that was in danger of being closed, and the colorful campaign launched to save it, entitled "Save Our Tails." Last fall, the Times published a lengthy article about the collapse of the global fishing market, which spurred the publication of a number of related articles about ocean acidification and conservation. Brater shared the articles with the company, and everyone became excited about the concept of combining these two conservation stories.

"We like to take on projects that force us to become experts on unfamiliar subjects, that makes us better educated citizens of the planet," explains Brater. "We will have to learn some science, but we are invested in doing work that stretches us."

The piece will be developed using the company's unique rehearsal process, which involves large expanses of time and is greatly influenced by the Polybe & Seats culture. Five women comprise the core decision-making body: Miriam Felton-Dansky (Associate Artistic Director), Stacey McMath (Producing Director) and Catherine Wallach (Associate Producer), as well as Brater and Schapiro. While each has an official title and role, they trade hats frequently during the development and production of each piece. "The work we produce is strongly affected by our group dynamic and the way that we work together," explains Schapiro. "It's creatively freeing to know that our collaborators are there to support whatever we are doing artistically." In addition to the five core members, the six-year-old company has acquired a valued extended family of actors and writers who have contributed substantially to multiple Polybe & Seats projects. "We have a very open, democratic rehearsal process," Brater says. "If the director has an acting idea or an actor has a writing idea, our dynamic makes it possible to bring that into the process, and sometimes the final product."

The company's most recent full production, the Charlotte Salomon Project, was developed over the course of two full years. The piece transforms Salomon's series of over 1300 paintings, produced during World War II in southern France, into a live theater experience. The Charlotte Salomon Project ran for four weeks in New York last November and recently toured in Michigan.

Brater and Schapiro agree that the space in which the Charlotte Salomon Project rehearsal and performed had a substantial impact on the final project. The company was able to take over the Brooklyn Fire Proof for their entire final stage of development, including an August 2006 workshop as well as the November production. According to Brater, "it was very helpful to us to be able to work in a nontraditional space, one that we were able to stay and rehearse in for a long period of time." The long residency made it possible to intimately meld the space's unique architecture with the show's design and staging. In performance, audience members entered through a hallway decorated with reproductions of Salomon's paintings. Recorded interviews and a biographical note painted on one wall provided information about her life and ultimate death in a concentration camp. In one room, Salomon received a drawing lesson while her stepmother practiced singing. A kitchen scene was performed in the space's genuine, partially functional kitchen. The company hopes to find a similar nontraditional, long-term space for their new ocean project.

Site selection also served as a crucial component of Polybe & Seats' staging of their assigned week of plays in the 365 Days/Plays project, which took place during the first week of January. Under McMath's direction, the five short plays set up camp in Pete's Candy Shop, a bar; UnionDocs, an arts collective; the Brooklyn Kitchen, a kitchenware store and The Greenpoint Reformed Church, as well as the Public Theater. The company's established relationship with the Williamsburg and Greenpoint neighborhoods was one inspiration for their choice of locations. "Brooklyn has a certain personality that makes it easier to do the type of work that we do," says Brater. "Local businesses have a strong interest in supporting the local artistic community." Bake sales on Bedford Avenue, a key fundraising strategy, further cement this relationship. While selling large quantities of cupcakes and vegan dog biscuits, company members are able to speak face-to-face with their audience and expand their mailing list.

The ladies of Polybe & Seats have an active summer planned. In addition to an August workshop presentation of their new ocean project, the group will produce two readings

on June 3 and 26 and conduct a children's Gertrude Stein workshop in July. Fall and winter plans will include a workshop of Schapiro's play *Better Angels*, first read publicly in February, and a revival of *Careful of Eights*, a collage of Gertrude Stein plays produced in 2003.

This summer, Polybe & Seats hosts two readings of works-in-progress—Risa Shoup's *Search and Seizure* and Elizabeth Emmons' *Sixteen* (check [www.polybeandseats.org](http://www.polybeandseats.org) for times and locations). They also host their Gertrude Stein children's camp—Let us Play a Play (final showing, July 20 at the Greenpoint Reformed Church). To register a child for Let Us Play A Play, email [info@polybeasndseats.org](mailto:info@polybeasndseats.org).

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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