



THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL: THE SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

by Chad Jones



Freese

Beth Wilmurt, Sommer Ulrickson and Tilla Kratochwil in Yes, Yes to Moscow. Photo: Iko

There are many reasons to produce the San Francisco International Arts Festival, according to its founder, Andrew Wood. One of them has to do with the way a good festival can transform a town.

"I learned that when I accidentally stayed a day too late in Edinburgh during the Fringe Festival," Wood says. "You discover when the festival is gone, you have the largest cultural hangover imaginable."

Five years ago, Wood started the San Francisco International Arts Festival--incorporating music, dance, theatre, opera and visual arts--because he says San Francisco already had the infrastructure in the form of venues, arts groups and marketing agencies to create a lower-cost festival.

This year's festival runs May 22 through June 8 at venues including Union Square, Shotwell Studios, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, CounterPulse, Dance Mission Theater, the Asian Art Museum and the Herbst Theatre.

"San Francisco is a great incubator town," Wood says. "It's full of young people honing their craft. But they get to a certain point and go, 'Now what?' Then they head to LA, New York or Europe. We lose them. What we have to do is try and create projects for them and earned income opportunities for them here."

He says he also wants to help create work with international scope that encourages cross-cultural collaboration—work that will go on to have a life and earning potential beyond the festival.

Local composer Erling Wold is making his second SFIAF appearance this year following his work with the German dance group Palindrome on a piece called *Blinde Liebe: a true story of blind love and brutal murder*.

The new work is a solo opera called *Mordake*, written for tenor John Duykers, and it's based on a story from an old volume of medical curiosities from the late 19th century. Apparently there was a wealthy British man, Edward Mordake, who had a "devil twin" in the form of a woman's face on the back of his head.

"I thought there were a lot of interesting things about gender in the story," Wold says. "You know, what it is to be a man or a woman and the fact that we all have both of those aspects in ourselves. This man is isolated in a room, and he can hear this woman's voice and no one else can. Very claustrophobic. Very interesting."

In his life outside the art world, Wold is a music software engineer, but he has never found much use for the software he creates, preferring real-world instruments over electronic. But for *Mordake*, he has composed an all-electronic score and uses the software so that Duykers can generate a woman's singing voice.

Wold collaborated with director Melissa "Missy" Weaver, librettist Douglas Kearney and German designer Frieder Weiss, whose expertise is creating interactive projections.

"It's going to be an intense hour," Wold promises. "Musically speaking, I tend toward the prettier and more minimalist side of the classical music world. This piece has a mix: some dark, noisy, intense music because of the subject matter, then parts that are much prettier."

Working within the context of a festival, Wold says, is a good thing for a piece like *Mordake*.

"A festival can provide greater recognition," he says. "There's so much good work here and around the world, and a lot of it would have wider appeal if it could just get more recognition. And I do think San Francisco could have a larger image in the world, especially the art world. I see so many good things here, but until someone takes them to New York or Berlin, no one notices."

San Francisco writer and director Mark Jackson, of Art Street Theatre, is making his first appearance in the festival with *Yes, Yes to Moscow*, a work he describes as a "choreographic theatre" adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

"A festival creates buzz and excitement," Jackson says. "I love being a cog in the machinery of an arts festival, especially an international festival, because art is such a good ambassador and has such great value in terms of bringing people together as humans and artists and not just as nationalities."

And, he adds, the SFIAF is more financially accessible than a lot of other festivals, which means more audience members will have access to the work. Festival tickets run from free (the Jewels in the Square program in Union Square) to \$20.

Jackson's piece, which had its premiere at Berlin's Deutsches Theater last fall, was created with codirector and choreographer Sommer Ulrickson, German designer Alexander Polzin, San Francisco performer Beth Wilmurt and Berlin performance artist Tilla Kratochwil. The entire creative team will reassemble for the American premiere.

Ulrickson, Wilmurt and Kratochwil star as the sisters who, after pining to get to Moscow all through Chekhov's play, finally find themselves in the city and don't know what to do now that they have what they've always wanted. The piece suggests that the women, who dance and sing and re-create scenes from the Chekhov play, are under observation at some kind of hospital.

"I just consider that we're doing *Three Sisters*, but through a side door," Jackson says. "I think Chekhov would like it, but he'd have complaints, just like he had complaints about Stanislavsky's original production. Chekhov's sense of humor is still very much there. He was after something stylish, and we're leaning into that heavily."

Jackson had known Ulrickson's work with the Fifth Floor Productions in San Francisco before she headed to Berlin, and when the two began to collaborate on *Yes, Yes to Moscow*, Jackson says he assumed she would work more with dance and he more with text.

"But by the end," he says, "it's difficult to say what came from whom."

In Berlin, the finished piece was about 95 percent in German and 5 percent in English, but that ratio will reverse for the American production.

"The cross-pollination of the German-American collaboration was incredible," Jackson says. "It really helped define the piece."

SFIAF president and executive director Wood says that kind of boundary-expanding collaboration and exposure to new things is really the core of any international festival.

He cites as an example the work of Brazilian dancer Cristina Moura, whose piece *like an idiot* is copresented by Cultural Odyssey at this year's festival.

"Her work, even her vocabulary, talks about things we don't talk about here," he says. "That's important. We are a town of artists. We need to see what's going on in the world around us. We can only learn from it."

The festival hasn't grown in size and stature quite as quickly as Wood says he had hoped it would, and he credits politics and funding hurdles for the delay.

"The arts community is one of San Francisco's central economic engines," Wood says. "We have to figure out how to demonstrate to the rest of the city how powerful we are."

Still, the festival continues, and this year's lineup is full of quirky, interesting artists whom Wood hopes will benefit as much as the audiences.

"This is an artist-focused festival," he says. "It's about artists expanding their horizons through working with each other. How do we not feel isolated here? Most things are going on in New York. We want to create an environment that says: You're fine staying here. You can have an international future if you stay here."

The San Francisco International Arts Festival runs May 22 through June 8. Visit sfiaf.org, or call (415) 399-9554.

Chad Jones is a Bay Area theatre writer whose Theater Dogs blog is at theaterdogs.net.