

# HERRINGBONE

STARRING  
BD WONG

*Book by Tom Cone • Music by Skip Kennon • Lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh  
Choreography by Darren Lee  
Musical Direction by Dan Lipton  
Directed by Roger Rees*

*A witty, quirky and spine tingling musical.  
An electrifying performance.*

SEPTEMBER 5 -  
OCTOBER 12, 2008



Berlind Theatre

609-258-ARTS (2787)

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BD Wong in Herringbone at WTF 2007, photo by Joan Marcus

## Emily Mann on *Herringbone*

Dear McCarter Patrons,

What a way to begin! It is with great excitement and anticipation that I welcome you to the 2008-2009 season. Our opening production of Tom Cone, Skip Kennon, and Ellen Fitzhugh's *Herringbone* unites two of the finest theater artists in the English-speaking world—Roger Rees and BD Wong.

Roger has accurately described BD as a “quadruple threat”—not only a talented actor, singer, and dancer, but also, in Roger's words, a “riveting human presence on stage.” Certainly, this is no surprise to anyone who saw, as I did, BD's bravura performance as Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*, for which he became the first actor in history to receive all five major New York Theater awards.

Roger Rees is not only an extraordinary director, but he, too, is a consummate performer, best known to our audiences for his astounding performance in the title role of the Royal Shakespeare Company's milestone production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. It earned him both an Olivier and a Tony Award, and made him a star in the American theater. A virtuosic actor of both classic and modern dramatic roles both here and in England, it is fitting that Roger Rees directs BD Wong in a piece that demands a tour de force performance.

It was at Williamstown last summer that Roger and BD first joined forces to mount a small studio-theater production of *Herringbone* to critical acclaim. It gives me great pleasure to host them both here now at McCarter to further explore and expand upon their work with all the support McCarter Theater can offer.

*Herringbone* is a play that celebrates the transformational possibilities of the theater. I hope you will take great pleasure in this exquisitely bizarre and theatrically inventive show-business tale. Please welcome Roger Rees and BD Wong to the Berlind stage. What a joy to have these two theater dynamos kick off our new season!

Yours,  
Emily Mann

# Character Profiles

## HERRINGBONE

Our narrator. A consummate vaudeville song and dance man and raconteur, whose theatrical offering is the story of one particularly eventful year in his past.

[singing]

*DID YA EVER HAVE ONE OF THOSE YEARS...?  
ONE OF THOSE HEAD-SHAKIN' YEARS...?  
FIFTY-TWO WEEKS  
OF GIGGLES OR SHRIEKS  
AND UP-AGAIN DOWN-AGAIN CHOICES...  
WITH OR WITHOUT HEARIN' VOICES...  
A MESS OF SUCCESS,  
OR AT TIMES JUST A MESS,  
TO THE LULLABY OF GRINDIN' GEARS...?  
DID YA EVER HAVE ONE OF THOSE YEARS?*

[speaking]

*That year for me was the grand year of nineteen-hundred and twenty-nine. If I know my American history, I believe it was the year panic became respectable.*

## GEORGE NOOKIN

Herringbone as a child. A quiet, unassuming and relatively ordinary eight-year-old boy from humble Demopolis, Alabama.

[singing]

*THERE'S SO MANY THINGS I WANNA BE—  
A PRIZEFIGHTER,  
A FAMOUS WRITER,  
A TWIN,  
AND WITH SO MANY THINGS I WANNA BE—  
  
A RACE DRIVER,  
A DEEP SEA DIVER,  
INVISIBLE...  
I'VE GOT TOO MUCH TO DO  
TO BE MAMA'S PRESIDENT, TOO...*

## LOUISE NOOKIN

George's sweet, sensitive, and loving mother. She is the embodiment of "Southern womanhood" and good manners. George is her pride and joy.

*Oh, you take my breath away, George! (An aside to ARTHUR:) He's practicin' his speech, Arthur. He could be President someday. (Calling) You could be President someday! Do you know that? Now, get dressed, sweetheart! We don't wanna be late for Uncle Billy's gift, do we?*

## ARTHUR NOOKIN

George's father. He is rougher around the edges than his devoted spouse and lacks her sensitivity and selflessness. As the head of the family during the Great Depression, he is poised to take advantage of any opportunity that could generate some cash.

*Last night I was sittin' contemplatin' the sad and sorry state of this family, when suddenly I saw the fiery finger of the Lord...and it pointed to Uncle Billy's words I'd hung up there on the bathroom door...And all at once for the first time, I understood those words of Uncle Billy's: "Culture Durin' Hard Times Does Real Well." And I listened as the Lord spake unto me...[singing] GOD SAID, "GO YE TO HOLLYWOOD."*

## NATHAN "CHICKEN" MOSELY

One half of a once famous vaudeville team "The Chicken and The Frog". With the onset of the Depression, Mosely is now relegated to adjudicating small-town speech contests at the local Lion's Clubs and giving private acting classes to Demopolis' semi-talented youth whose families can afford his fee.

*He's very good. I mean he could be very good...And if I may suggest that you cash in that Baby Bond and reinvest it in the boy in the form of professional actin' lessons, I believe he may have a future...Come here, George. Child stars are doin' real well on the talkies these days, Mr. Nookin. Now stand lookin' at me!*

## LOU "THE FROG"

The thirty-seven-year-old mischievous spirit who supernaturally possesses young George's body. Self-described as the "best midget hooper in the business," Lou's career and life were prematurely cut short ten years earlier, and now he has returned to take the stage. He is an expert salesman and self-promoter who adroitly convinces people to go along with his plans.

*The hospital, I tell ya, won't do ya no good. But the palaces of America may. The beauty of them halls is callin' for my appearance. Callin' for your son. And it won't take long. I promise ya. A few weeks on the road and money in your purse and a smile on the audience's faces and the lift I needed and never got. But boy was I close. Please? Can we make an arrangement? They'll never know I was there. Your son will be a smash and pockets will bulge and Demopolis will seem a bit different on your return. And, of course, I do all this in just six weeks. I guarantee it. Is it a deal?*

## DOT

Desk clerk at the La Rochelle Hotel and old-time lady-friend of Lou's. It appears that she is not the sharpest tack in the box. Although she doesn't recognize Lou in his current confounding packaging, she is easily susceptible to his advances.

*Oh, Lou—Lou—talk about your angel skin and your baby-fine hair, and that voice, that sweet—*

# One of Those Years: 1929

- January 2** Canada and the US agree on a plan to preserve Niagara Falls.
- January 15** Martin Luther King Jr. is born in Atlanta, Georgia.
- February 14** St. Valentine's Day Massacre.
- March 4** Herbert Hoover is inaugurated thirty-first President of the United States.
- May 13** National Crime Syndicate founded in Atlantic City by Charlie "Lucky" Luciano, Meyer Lansky, and other "crime bosses" based in New York City and New Jersey.
- May 16** First Academy Awards are presented; *Wings* with Clara Bow wins Best Picture.
- June 12** Annelies Marie Frank (Anne Frank) is born in Frankfurt am Main.
- June 27** First public demonstration of color TV at Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York.
- October 11** JC Penney opens its 1,252nd store, making it a nationwide company with stores in all 48 states.
- October 18** Women are announced to be persons by the privy council in Britain.
- October 24** "Black Thursday," the first phase of stock market crash on the New York Stock Exchange. (see "Boom and Bust: The Great Crash of '29")
- Variety* reports that only six full-time vaudeville theatres are still in operation, and approximately three hundred part-time vaudeville theatres offer variety acts between feature film screenings.
- October 28** "Black Monday," the second phase of stock market crash.
- October 29** "Black Tuesday," the third and final phase of the stock market crash.
- November 7** New York City Museum of Modern Art opens to the public.
- Bob Hope is contracted for his first national vaudeville tour on the Keith-Orpheum circuit.
- November 29** First flight over the South Pole is made by Floyd Bennett, US Admiral Richard Byrd, Captain Ashley McKinley, and Harold Gatty.
- December 3** U.S. President Herbert Hoover announces to U.S. Congress that the worst effects of the recent stock market crash are behind the nation and the American people have regained faith in the economy.

**December 31** Guy Lombardo plays *Auld Lang Syne* for the first time.

## BOOM THEN BUST: THE GREAT CRASH OF '29

- *By Paula T. Alekson*

Although the signs and symptoms of a worldwide economic downturn were evident prior to the stock market crash of October 1929, the historical event lives in the minds of Americans, then and now, as the start of the “Great Depression.” The 1920’s—figuratively referred to as the “Roaring Twenties”—had been a period of great economic prosperity for the U.S. and the rest of North America. So prosperous was the market that not only experienced financiers were chasing the rainbow, but middle-class and some working-class citizens mortgaged their homes and poured cash and savings into the market to have their chance at the rainbow’s pot of gold. One shining example of economic progress was evidenced by the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which had increased to five times its value in five years (1924-1929), reaching a peak of 381.17 on September 3, 1929.

On Thursday, October 24 panic set in on an exceptionally chaotic trading floor as a record number of shares (12.9 million) were traded. A group of principal Wall Street bankers met the next day to attempt to quell the chaos by pooling their personal capital and employing an economic tactic that had halted another panic several years before; they purchased shares of U.S. Steel and shares from other well established and stable companies at prices above their actual current market value (e.g., although U.S. Steel was selling at \$195 a share, they purchased it at \$205). Their strategy worked to calm the market by Friday’s closing bell. However, the press’s reporting of the events of “Black Thursday” worried investors across the nation. Many decided to remove their money from the market when it opened on Monday morning. On that day, October 28, the Dow suffered a record one-day loss of 13% of its overall value. One record loss begot another, when on the next day, Tuesday, October 29, investors traded 16.4 million shares. A number of highly reputable and wealthy stock market investors tried to stem the tide of sell-offs and to model confidence in the market’s ability to bounce back. They bought many shares, but to no avail. By the end of “Black Tuesday” the stock market had lost \$14 billion, bringing the total loss for the week to \$30 billion. Perhaps even more depressingly, the “Great Crash” erased thirty-six years of bull market gains and would not return to these levels for another twenty-five years.

Although not technically the cause of the “Great Depression,” the crash of 1929 contributed to the beginning of economic and political strife for the industrialized countries, which as a result suffered drastic declines in output (the U.S. saw a 47% decline in production) and severe unemployment (at its highest point it exceeded 20% in the U.S.), and resulted in deflation (a general decline in prices, often caused by a reduction in the supply of money or credit) in almost every country in the world. For Americans, the standard of living dropped abruptly, factories were closed, homes were lost, marriages were postponed, birthrates dropped, luxuries were abandoned for necessities, and the poor became poorer. In many families, every member—father, mother, and children—struggled to find any type of work or source of income to put food on the table. Images of breadlines and apple sellers on the streets remain ingrained in

the collective American memory. Although the U.S. economy began showing signs of recovery by the spring of 1933, it would take almost another decade for the U.S. economy to return to a long-term trend of financial growth.

## VAUDEVILLE: "ALWAYS SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY"

- By Paula T. Alekson

### Vaudeville Variety

actors  
acrobats  
all-girl bands  
animal acts  
clowns  
comedians  
contortionists  
dancers  
fast-change artists  
"freak" acts  
(including "midget" acts, strongmen, etc.)  
hypnotists  
male and female impersonators  
jugglers  
magicians  
musicians  
monologists  
orchestras  
pantomimes/mimes  
singing sister or dancing brother acts  
solo song and dance men and women  
ventriloquists  
sports heroes  
vocalists (of opera, popular song, etc.)  
writers

American vaudeville was a live, popular theatrical entertainment phenomenon of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Born out of the Industrial Revolution and subsequently stifled by the rising ascendancy of motion pictures, vaudeville is synonymous with "variety," which describes not only the entertainment genre's nature, but also its mongrel ancestry. Variety-type entertainments provided by itinerant performers who tramped from town to town had been around for millennia. In nineteenth-century England, variety or music-hall found a venue and an organizing principle of successive acts, first in taverns and later in theaters built expressly for the entertainment enterprise. Variety acts emerged in North America as early as colonial times, and, following the British model, eventually evolved from bawdy saloon entertainments into the more polished and refined vaudeville (probably derived from the French *Vaux-de-Vire* which refers to popular satirical songs from the fifth century).

Featuring an amalgamation of performance modes borrowed from music-hall, American minstrelsy, the burlesque stage, medicine and freak shows, and dime museums, vaudeville became big business as family entertainment. Although originally targeted at an audience made up of the urban and largely immigrant working class in search of

escapist and easily consumable entertainment, vaudeville's audience grew to include both the middle and upper classes.

### Well-Known Vaudevillians

Al Jolson  
Bert Williams  
W. C. Fields  
Harry Houdini  
Bud Abbott and Lou Costello  
Will Rogers  
Bill "Bojangles"  
Robinson  
Fanny Brice  
George M. Cohan  
Mae West  
W.C. Fields  
Will Rogers  
Buster Keaton  
Charlie Chaplin  
The Marx Brothers  
Milton Berle  
Bob Hope  
Fred Astaire  
James Cagney  
Jack Benny  
George Burns and Gracie Allen  
Sophie Tucker  
Cary Grant  
(Archibald Leech)

In the heyday of the form (i.e., 1900-1920) a vaudeville bill, or slate of acts, was typically organized thusly: An animal or acrobatic act opened the program, and was followed by a "singing sister," "dancing brother," or some other sort of singing and/or dancing act. A

comedy sketch or one-act play was then performed. Next came a novelty act (such as a magician, mind reader, high diver, regurgitator, etc.), followed by an up-and-coming star turn which was buttoned by intermission. The second half of the program began with a performance by a large choir or orchestra, which was followed by the headliner, or main attraction. The eighth, and final, act was typically a short film, or possibly an annoying act meant to chase lingerers out of the auditorium being readied for a second show.

Vaudeville performers came from all branches of theater and the performing arts, including musical comedy, the “legitimate” dramatic stage, opera, and concert hall. The essential vaudevillian—a performer who spent all of his or her time playing the vaudeville circuits or part-time on the “legit” stage and the rest of the time on the “vaude” stage—need not only be talented, but also fortified with uncommon energy, enthusiasm, stamina, determination, and great powers of self-promotion. Many vaudevillians rose from working-class status to make it big as headliners, and many utilized the vaudeville stage as a springboard, easily transitioning success “on the boards” into highly lucrative radio, film, and, eventually, television careers.

### **“My mother thanks you, my father thanks you...and I thank you”: Children on the Vaudeville Stage**

Famed “Yankee Doodle Dandy” and vaudeville child star George M. Cohan closed every Cohan Family act with the above exit line. Cohan and his sister Josie got their start in vaudeville at the ages of eight and seven, respectively, with Josie as a contortionist and George a violinist. They were only two of a few hundred child performers who sang, danced, played, juggled, joked, contorted, and entertained audiences across the country, “two-a-day,” six days a week.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) monitored the vaudeville circuit and sought to put a stop to the exploitation of child performers, many of whom were the only source of income for their poor or working-class families. Ironically, as Trav S.D. notes in his history of vaudeville, *No Applause—Just Throw Money*, the SPCC “chose to crack down on the handful of underage entertainers—while allowing thousands of urchins to work lathes and assembly lines (227).” This double standard, no doubt, was a product of the long history of antitheatrical prejudice which judged theater and show-business folk and their environment as immoral.

Some stage parents did better for their children than others by shielding their youngsters from adult situations backstage, hiring private tutors or “home-schooling” their kids on the road, and taking advantage of all the educational opportunities that the road had to offer, for example touring the vast nation and visiting places of significant historical or social importance. Still, many former vaudeville child stars felt that their childhoods were cut short by work, responsibility, and the pressure to stay young, cute, and employable.

# A “CAST OF ONE”: THE HISTORY, ART, AND NATURE OF THE ONE-PERSON SHOW

*In the world of the theatre, the one-man show is perhaps the closest thing to having it all, a supreme test of assurance and ability, of magnetism and charisma. The format is both seductive and frightening; there's no one to play against, to lean on, to share the criticism. But, for an actor, the prize at the end of a successful solo performance is not only applause but also acclaim—unshared.*

—Enid Nemy, from “Four for the Season, Alone in the Spotlight”, *New York Times* (October 5, 1984)

The American one-person show found its roots in the “platform performances” of the late-nineteenth century, in which authors, public speakers, and actors “masquerading” as professional elocutionists gave readings or recitations from published works of literature to polite audiences for their cultivation and edification. These events were purposely held in non-theatrical venues as a way to distinguish them from theater entertainments (such as vaudeville), which, due to the long history of antitheatrical prejudice (i.e., a bias against or hostility toward the theater and those associated with it) were still regarded as immoral amusements created by sinful and degenerate individuals. The lecture, Lyceum, and Chautauqua circuits featured American platform personalities such as Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Alexander Graham Bell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Daniel Webster, Anna Cora Mowatt and Charlotte Cushman. When Charles Dickens toured both Great Britain and America reading excerpts from his various works, he caused a sensation by embodying his numerous and diverse characters as he read. Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) spent much of his non-writing career appearing on the platform as lecturer and humorist, and he perfected a presentational technique which transformed his literature into performance texts. Lectures and readings eventually metamorphosed into one-person performances on the platform circuit as the focus of the performative material turned from literature to character sketches and monologues written expressly for performance. Eventually one-person showpieces began to appear on both the vaudeville and the legitimate stages, and sketches and monologues gave way to monodramas, or one-character plays. A surge in the number of one-person shows occurred in the American theater in the 1950's and has never really decreased, owing not only to the popularity of the form, but also to its economical nature—a cast of one and, quite often, no set!

One-person shows—or solo performances, as they are often called—of the late-twentieth century to the present are largely artistic vehicles designed to display actor virtuosity and stamina, to highlight an actor's ability of impersonation (of either one character or a variety of characters), to present a theater-going audience to a larger-than-life historical (or sometimes living) figure, and/or as a means of intimate autobiographical exploration and expression.

There are two modes for one-person shows: monologue and monopolylogue. A monologue features a single character speaking to a silent or unheard listener (most often the audience, who may be ignored or treated as observer, guest, confidant, or as a

specific character). A monopolylogue features multiple characters, all performed by one actor; some monopolylogues feature dialogue in which the various characters talk to or converse with one another.

There are many types of one-person shows, and some defy clear classification. The most straightforward forms are biographical or autobiographical in nature. A biographical one-person play involves an actor directly impersonating or presenting his or her interpretation of the essence of a living or historical personage. Examples of this form are *Mark Twain Tonight!* written and performed by Hal Holbrook, William Luce's portrait of Emily Dickinson, entitled *The Belle of Amherst*, which was originally performed by Julie Harris; *Golda's Balcony*, in which Tovah Feldshuh first created William Gibson's dramatic depiction of Golda Meir; and Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* in which Jefferson Mays created the role of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and thirty-four other characters with whom she interacts (including the playwright). In an autobiographical one-person play, a writer/performer appears as him or herself and tells sometimes extremely intimate stories about his or her own life. Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, Lisa Kron's *2.5 Minute Ride*, and Martin Moran's *The Tricky Part* are representative of this form.

Many contemporary solo performance pieces defy broad and clear categorization. For example, Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, utilize documentary material, such as personally recorded interviews and archival video recordings of public and private persons, which Smith weaves into a tapestry of monologues to tell the stories of and comment upon two dramatically explosive socio-historical events. Jane Wagner's *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written for and performed by Lily Tomlin, at first glance seems to be a series of largely unconnected, self-contained, whimsical character monologues, but the play slowly reveals itself as a satirical critique and outline of the Women's Movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. Monopolyloguist Nilaja Sun's *No Child...* draws from the playwright-performer's true-to-life experience as a teaching artist in the Bronx to present a monodrama of Sun's attempts to mount a production of *Our Country's Good* with a group of disaffected high school students. In one scene of the play, Sun embodies at least seven characters in an amazingly animated conversation between a classroom of students, Sun, and their teacher.

Regardless of their mode or form, one-person shows give the solo performer power, control, and complete responsibility over the work in performance. For the artist who is both writer and performer, there is absolute artistic freedom in the creative process and performance of his or her work. Perhaps one of the greatest reliefs for the solo actor is that he or she doesn't have anyone depending upon him or her in the midst of a live performance, but therein lies the challenge, as he or she has no one but him or herself to depend upon—it is just the actor and the audience. It is a risky and exhilarating proposition for both sides of the theatrical equation.

# Who's Who

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## Cast



*Herringbone*  
BD Wong

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## Artistic Staff

<i>Book</i>	Tom Cone
<i>Music</i>	Skip Kennon
<i>Lyrics</i>	Ellen Fitzhugh
<i>Directed By</i>	Roger Rees
<i>Choreography</i>	Darren Lee
<i>Musical Director</i>	Dan Lipton
<i>Set design</i>	Eugene Lee
<i>Costume design</i>	William Ivey Long
<i>Lighting design</i>	Kenneth Posner
<i>Sound design</i>	Scott Lehrer and Leon Rothenberg

## Bios

**BD Wong** (*Herringbone*) Broadway: *M. Butterfly* (Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Theatre World, Clarence Derwent, Tony Awards); *Face Value*; *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*; *Pacific Overtures* (Broadway revival). Television: currently, *Law & Order: SVU*. Also: HBO's *Oz*; *All-American Girl*. Film: *The Freshman*, *Father of the Bride* (1 and 2), *Jurassic Park*, *And the Band Played On*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Mulan* (1 and 2), *Slappy and the Stinkers*, *The Salton Sea*, *Stay*. Author of the critically acclaimed memoir, *Following Foo (The Electronic Adventures of the Chestnut Man)*, published by Harper Collins. Community service recognitions from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Asian AIDS Project, GLAAD, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Association of Asian-Pacific American Artists, East/West Players, Second Generation. Board member: Actors' Fund of America. Vocal training: Bill Schuman. Fitness training: Rob Morea. Haircut by Vaughn. In memory of David Rounds, as always. [www.bdwong.com](http://www.bdwong.com)

**Roger Rees** (*Director*) Directing credits include: *Arms and the Man* (Roundabout); *Mud, River Stone* (Playwrights Horizons); *Loves Labour's Lost*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Old Globe, San Diego); *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Rivals*, *The Film Society*, *Herringbone*, *Double Double*, *Anything Goes*, *The Late Middle Classes* (Williamstown);

*Red Memories* (New York Stage and Film); *Treemonisha*, *Juniper Tree*, *White House Cantata*, *American Operetta*, *Kurt Weill* (Collegiate Chorale); *Here Lies Jenny* (Zipper; Post Street SF); *Julius Caesar*, *Turkey Time*, *John Bull* (Bristol Old Vic, UK). TV: HBO's *Oz*.

**Dan Lipton** (*Thumbs DuBois*, *Music Director/Piano*) Broadway: *The Coast of Utopia* (onstage piano/music coordinator), *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (piano), *The Full Monty* (piano). Off-Broadway: *The Civilians' Paris Commune* (onstage piano, Public Lab), *Don't Quit Your Night Job* (co-creator and music director), Michael John LaChiusa's *Little Fish* (music director, Second Stage), Duncan Sheik's *Nero* workshop (music director, The Public). Regional: *Most Wanted* (orchestrations, La Jolla), *Herringbone* (onstage piano, Williamstown), *The Light in the Piazza* (piano/conductor, Goodman). Concert: Audra McDonald (associate music director since 2000), John Lloyd Young (music director/arranger), Kelli O'Hara (music director/arranger). Composer: *notes to MariAnne*, *The Blonde Streak*, and *JOE!* with David Rossmer. Songs on albums by Lauren Kennedy and Jason Danieleley. Awards: ASCAP Plus Award for Popular Music, O'Neill Theater Center Holof Award for lyrics (with Rossmer).

**Darren Lee** (*Choreography*) Most recently directed and choreographed *Miss Saigon* for the MUNY and choreographed *Kiss Me, Kate* for the Glimmerglass Opera Festival. Broadway: Associate Choreographer, *Pacific Overtures*. Japan: *Turandot*. New York: *Bronx Express* (Fringe Festival), *Stephen Sondheim's 75th Birthday Celebration* (New Amsterdam), *Dance Break 2005* (Alvin Ailey Studios). International: *The Snow Queen* (Tokyo Disney); *Copacabana*, *Fancy Dance* (Takarazuka Revue Company); *10,000 Person Show* (Tokyo Electric). Regional: *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (Diamond Head Theatre, HI); *Chicago* (Riverside Theatre, FL); *Carnival* (UNLV); *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Westchester Broadway); *Pacific Overtures* (North Shore, Cincinnati Playhouse, Atlanta Alliance); *Miss Saigon* (Paper Mill Playhouse, MUNY); *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Aida*, *Joseph...*, *The Fantasticks* (MUNY); *Guys and Dolls* (Trinity University, TX). As a performer: TV, film, and ten Broadway shows.

# *Herringbone* Interview with BD Wong and Roger Rees

*Before Herringbone rehearsals began at McCarter, actor, BD Wong and director Roger Rees discussed their thoughts on the play, collaboration, and the mysteries of performing, with Literary Manager Carrie Hughes.*

**CH: BD, you're very passionate about this play, and I did not know until Roger told us today, that you'd first seen it at Playwrights' Horizons as an usher. I was wondering if you could talk about the experience of seeing this play for the first time.**

BD: I was very fresh off the plane from San Francisco to New York to be an actor. I had been in one of my first shows, at the Equity Library Theater, in the chorus of a musical called *Applause*. The stage manager of that production took me to Playwrights Horizons to teach me how to be a volunteer usher, because that's how you see free shows. And we saw *Herringbone*. I don't know how to describe it. I just have this very strong sense that one, I felt I would never forget it, and two, that I connected to it. Also, part of my experience as a high school actor was exploring multi-character work. I did a fair amount of work with forensics, in which actors took ten-minute cuttings of plays, and the more characters you could do, the more interesting it would be and you would win. So part of my sensibility at that time was doing all these characters. I just thought it was cool, and it was very normal to me. So I saw it and took to it.

The next part of the story is probably nine or ten years later. I first met Richie Jackson, who I ended up being in a committed relationship with for fifteen years. He had just come from a producing program at NYU and way back then--this was 1989--on one of our first dates he said, "Well, what [project] do you want to do?" The first thing that came out of my mouth was, "There's this show I saw at Playwrights; it's called *Herringbone*; it's very weird and interesting and I loved it so much. I've never heard anything about it since then and it must be almost ten years now. Don't know anything about it--don't know who wrote it, don't know anything." And romantically enough, the next day, in my dressing room (I was in *M. Butterfly* then) was a copy of the script. And that's when I fell in love! The two of us spent a good part of our relationship looking for a home for it. I did a small production of it at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia, and then in 2007, when Roger was working at Williamstown, we made the connection and I kind of seduced Roger into doing it.

**CH: And Roger, when BD brought you this piece, what made you decide to produce and direct this particular play?**

RR: Well, from an economic point of view when you're running a theater, a one-man show with a three piece orchestra, and it being a musical too, is a very, very attractive proposition. But really I thought we should see BD do it, because no one really knows that this is his other side. We see him as a very serious actor, and maybe we've seen him in some musicals and things, but never carrying a musical in this way. But I know he can do this stuff--this tour-de-force aspect of his abilities. It's thrilling to see one person achieve such an extraordinary thing. Today we listened to him do a reading of it, but if

you can imagine the dynamic of doing everything else the story suggests emotionally—it's a wonderful, wonderful thing. And also singing on pitch! I'm amazed.

**CH: Can you describe the play a little, what you think it's really, for lack of a better phrase, "about?"**

BD: *Herringbone* is, for all an intents and purposes, about the possession of a little boy, with a vaudeville setting. They're in the deep south, it's the Depression; the story revolves around all of these things. However, the experience of seeing the show has very little to do with any of those elements. The experience of seeing the show to me is an emotional experience about watching the commitment of an individual performer, and the difficulty of conveying how pain and emotion are wrapped up in a performer's life, and how a performer often uses that pain and experience and history and difficulty with hopefully positive results. So *Herringbone* itself is the positive result of a person's immense, deep, dark, and terrible pain.

This person has literally, taken his depression and made a show about this depression, which takes place in the Depression. So the Depression in the show is kind of a metaphor for his own desperate period of his life, and he's taken those desperate elements and put them in his crazy, creative way, into a show. We're telling a story that takes place in the 1929, but we're watching something that's actually happening in the moment. And it's an emotional experience that he's having while he's telling the story. The relationship between the actor and the material is just as important as the [plot] itself.

That's partly why the vaudeville comes and goes. We don't want it to be a complete vaudeville thing, because then it feels like it's a period piece. And for me, the period nature of the story itself is just a kind of a place he's selected to set it in.

RR: *Herringbone*, in previous incarnations, embraced a more overall vaudevillian design and tone; we've chosen to use this sparingly. It feels very interesting to present the actor on the stage telling the story, undecorated at times. Tom Cone, our author, talks a lot about the struggle of an actor and the "dreadful" obligation to perform the play every night. This helps that conceit.

**CH: Can you talk a little bit about the music in the piece? How do you think the music moves the story?**

BD: What I like about the show is that at first glance it's a traditional musical form. It's a two-act musical with eighteen songs in it, and all these different characters and it's a great tale and it has a wonderful arc, all these great emotional highs and lows, and it has this great ending. It appears to be a musical that would be performed by a cast of fourteen people, and it isn't until you really get in there that you realize that fourteen people really couldn't perform the material because then it wouldn't be about what, at least, I think it's about. One person has to perform the whole thing for it to be about the spirit of performing and theater, theatrics, and synthesizing all the different parts of yourself into a healthy whole.

At first glance, the score and the book have the feeling of being like lots of different musicals that you know, and yet somehow it's completely twisted and turned on its head as well. Lots of the individual songs are like a lot of normal songs that further the action

of regular musicals and yet there are some musical pieces in it that are extremely dark and extremely unique. The song in the middle of the second act, which is called "A Mother" which is about Herringbone singing about his mother, is probably the most traditionally engaging musical song. That is where the elements of vaudeville and showmanship and emotion and passion of the storyteller all come together. But there are lots of other songs that have their own charm and each character gets their own song, so that's fun to see different characters singing in different voices and completely different personalities, and that makes it fun for me.

I also think the score is extremely sophisticated. A lot of people don't recognize or notice that Skip Kennon's orchestration for the pianist, for example, which is a role that he himself originally played at Playwrights, is written as a kind of sister role to the character of Herringbone. It is one pianist playing the role of almost every single instrument in a big orchestra, by himself, all in one performance, just like it is one actor playing many roles. And the score is extremely difficult to play. It's always been extremely difficult for me to find someone who can really play it the way Dan [Lipton] can play it. I've taken it to many different pianists, and they've gone "Oh, my god, there's so many notes!" This is what pianists say when there's a lot of stuff going on. And what Skip is doing is cramming all of these different voices into it so that the effect of listening to him play is very full.

**CH: It's a one-man show, with a director, and I was wondering if both of you could talk about the dynamic between the performer and the director in a one-person show.**

BD: I feel very lucky to have found Roger, because Roger is an actor who completely empathizes with almost anything that I propose or question from the actor's point of view....It's a somewhat vulnerable position to be putting yourself in, first of all, because I feel very close to the material, so bringing that material to a director is a bit of a crap shoot. You don't know what the chemistry's going to be, and our chemistry was extremely synchronized. We seemed to understand each other, particularly regarding this play. It was really important for me to collaborate with someone who understood my strong desire to express things that I felt might be included in the direction of the show and yet also would have a pretty firm idea that something might not be right or wouldn't work or wouldn't be right for me. And so, that combination of things is really valuable to have and it's paid off for us.

RR: The negotiation between us has been very interesting, because sometimes when we can't quite meet on an idea but we're very close, we suddenly together see a ray of light and we understand something much, much better. That's been really useful. There's a third component in this: Darren Lee, the choreographer, who's not just a brilliant choreographer, but as a man, is certainly as firmly questioning and forthright as we try to be. So it's a sort of triumverate, really, in making this thing happen, because none of us want it to be glib or cozy. And it is a difficult piece. That's what's fascinating about it. You have to be sure you hit all the markers; otherwise you don't get it.

**CH: What do you want the audience to think about when they sit down for this show?**

BD That's a good question for this show.

Well, I want them to know... I'm not going to find the right word because it's not theater and it's not performing, but it's something about the definition of theatrical. And I think that it is something that if you pick up on it in this production it will inform the way you see other performers in other plays. Because what we're trying to do is dissect all of the magical, weird, psychological nuances of performing itself...there are very few plays that even begin to discuss this. I feel that *Herringbone* is one of them.

## Interview With Choreographer Darren Lee and Music Director Dan Lipton

I was fortunate enough to sit down and chat with Darren Lee, *Herringbone's* choreographer, and Dan Lipton, who's serving triple duty as music director, pianist, and performing as Thumbs Dubois. As a performer, Lee has appeared in ten Broadway shows including the 2005 revival of *Pacific Overtures*, for which he also served as Associate Choreographer. Most recently, he choreographed *Kiss Me, Kate* for the Glimmerglass Opera Festival and *Miss Saigon* for MUNY, which he also directed. Lipton was the original pianist for the Broadway musicals *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *The Full Monty*. He appeared playing piano onstage in Tom Stoppard's play *The Coast of Utopia* at Lincoln Center Theater. Lipton also music-directs and arranges concerts for performers including Audra McDonald, John Lloyd Young, and Kelli O'Hara.

-Patrick McKelvey, Literary Intern

**Patrick:** BD has said that he was immediately drawn to this piece and that he has been, in a sense, campaigning to perform it for years. I'm curious as to how you first came into the contact with *Herringbone* and what your initial reactions were.

**Dan:** [BD] called me in 1999. I'd just moved to New York in 1997, so I had barely worked yet, but I had done enough that my name got to him as a good pianist who's kinda fearless. It's very hard music, it's a lot of notes: it scares people....

**Darren:** I had known BD socially for many years. BD had also known my work as a choreographer over that period of time and how it has progressed. He showed me the [*Herringbone*] material when we were doing *Pacific Overtures*. I thought it was incredibly unique and I thought that the music was excellent and I thought lyrically it was extremely interesting. But I really didn't have any sort of idea of the depth, or impact, or the overall appeal, and the timeliness that this piece may have. That has been very exciting to explore since that initial reading. The script is dark and strange, and very difficult to hear in your head. All of these characters really do come to life and unfold in the actor's performance.

**Dan:** The first time we did a reading of this it astounded me. It struck me as an undiscovered chestnut of awesome music. This score should definitely be heard! It doesn't sound like it was written 25 years ago. It sounds like it could have been written yesterday. It has this old, vaudeville thing going on, but it's also very modern, very dissonant. It's a schizophrenic score that perfectly matches what the actor has to do. I

remember it confused me the first few readings. I didn't really know what was going on, but I got that it was deep. I got that it was challenging in that good way.

**Darren:** It's very funny that way.... The [creators] worked very hard to make it a very intelligent piece of theater, both musically and in the script. We're hoping to deliver that sort of depth because it is so built-in. It is not a fluffy musical about nothing, or a one man show where people are just entertained because he plays lots of different characters.

**Patrick:** Dan described *Herringbone's* sound as contemporary. Roger Rees, the director, has previously discussed his fear of overplaying the vaudeville element in *Herringbone*. I'm wondering what you did in terms of musical direction and choreography to help alleviate Roger's fears regarding periodization.

**Dan:** As far as interpreting the score, [composer Skip Kennon] is very specific in his writing. He's very Sondheim-esque as far as every accent and every crescendo and every dynamic is all there so you don't have to do much other than just execute it. That's what I've always been coaching BD to do, stick to the ink. The ink works, and that's rare, in theater. I think performers often have to lift the ink off the page to find things in their material. This is kind of the opposite. Anything BD does is just magnifying what's already there.

The score sounds like the character. It doesn't sound like 1930, it doesn't sound like 1980 when it was written, and it doesn't sound like 2008. It sounds like *Herringbone*.

**Darren:** From a movement standpoint, there's a certain expectation that this is going to be told in a vaudeville vocabulary and I think we made a very large attempt to not make the parameters of our creation so narrow....We don't have to have the exact steps that you would have on a vaudeville circuit. They're inspired by that, but at times they're more character driven and at times they're even contemporary. People don't associate, necessarily, with historical dance. They associate with the silhouette or the shape or the rhythm of something that is a pastiche or an ode to that, therefore they can access that in the contemporary world.

**Dan:** I think sometimes audiences are more willing to digest dark material if they have some distance from it. Setting a story with dark themes decades ago, it's a little easier to get into because it's not happening right now in your world. And I think we're trying to toe that line. The story this guy's telling takes place during the Depression, but the experience of you watching it is right now. We're not making any apologies for that fact, no apologies that it's 2008.

**Patrick:** Darren, you've worked as a choreographer on much larger musicals such as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Chicago*, shows with huge ensemble numbers. I'm curious about your approaches to more conventional musicals and a show like *Herringbone*, in which there is still an ensemble, but that ensemble is embodied by a single performer. What pleasures and challenges did this opportunity offer?

**Darren:** In a traditional musical where you have a dance ensemble, you use that group of dancers to serve generally as metaphoric equivalent. They're there to be the backbone, or the feeling, of the presentational aspect of a musical number. When you're

dealing with a single actor, it's much more like staging someone's solo in a particular show. You have to deal with the parameters under which that character would be able to move. So this show has been much more like dealing with a bunch of solos. The difficult thing about that is that you're requiring a single actor to move not only in a bunch of styles, but as a bunch of different characters. So within a single number, BD will be dancing as a young woman and then he has to be dancing as a child. We've seen that done through voice and through body structure and posture. Through dance it's the same thing. It requires a full understanding of how that one character would dance, and a full understanding of how the other characters would dance, and then the ability to switch between the two so that you show that there's contrast. It's both challenging and thrilling to work on a piece like this—completely different really than you would work with an ensemble.

**Patrick: Dan, in addition to your responsibilities as music director, you also perform the onstage role of the pianist, Thumbs Dubois. You've previously mentioned the ways in which the virtuosity required of that character makes it somewhat of a sister role to Herringbone and I was hoping you might elaborate on that.**

**Dan:** I remember the first reading we did in '99 and [BD] asked me to say this line and I went, "Oh—I have a line?" He has a lot more work than me, but I'm pretty much an equal partner in that there are a lot of notes, and it's hard. For this production, I'm going to attempt to memorize it all, to get more on the tightrope with him. Luckily, I've been playing this music so long that it's a little easier than something that was just put in front of me.

It's a weird mix of getting all the notes down, but then I'm also actually playing two characters onstage during the play. I'm in a costume, I have a few lines, and I have to react to him. Even when I'm playing some really complex passage, I sometimes have to look up and connect with him. I'm not a trained actor, but I happen to have fallen into a groove now where I perform a lot onstage. I've done gigs in Broadway pits where no one sees you, so it seems like less is at stake. Being so visible here, there's a lot more weight on my shoulders and that's why it's fun.

**Patrick: You were both involved with a previous incarnation of *Herringbone* at Williamstown Theatre Festival. Can you talk specifically about what you learned from doing the show at Williamstown and what we might be able to expect to be different for the production at McCarter?**

**Darren:** The Williamstown production was, in many ways, BD's way of saying "Look: This thing that I've been championing for a really long time has value, and it has a voice, and it has a point of view, and it has timelessness." I think we did our best in the time that was allotted to be true to the material and to present the best version of what it was going to be. I think what I learned from that production was that we are no longer in the position to [have to] prove that the show is valid or that the show can be done or that the show has something to say. Now we are in this wonderful position, especially in the production that McCarter's going to be able to allow, to take elements that can be creatively enhanced technically, or look at things that didn't quite land and analyze what we can do to make it better. One of the largest things that we've tried to accomplish in this particular production is to understand for BD why he needs to tell this story. I mean, there's a real reason why he's held on for this long and there's a real reason why it

means something to him. It's taken him a bit of time to do the work to flesh out what that is. To take that sheer idea, to integrate it directly into the show itself, has been something really thrilling and really exciting. It is the essence of theater. It's why you do it, it's why you do it at the time you do it, with the people you do it with, and the vocabulary you do it with.

**Dan:** Williamstown last year was an eye-opener because I'd done so many readings of it before and those were just me and him in a room, and finally, "Oh my god, I have bass and drums! Wow, we have lights! Wow, we have costumes! This is an actual show, it's not just in my head anymore." But now with the support that McCarter has provided, as far as the budget and the stagecraft that we're able to do here in a larger space, and the fact that we have this amazing design team of all Tony-winning Broadway designers, it opens the whole thing up. Williamstown was more like a simple blackbox production.

**Darren:** To me, the benefit of having done it completely bare-bones, is that when you decide to add something, when you decide to go with a technical choice, you make that decision very carefully, with a lot of knowledge. We know the show works in a very simple form, so we know that that is gold. We know not to mess with that that much. We know that if we are to add technical items to the show, things that cost money, it is not to draw attention to the fact that this is a higher tech version of the show, it is to use those elements to enhance the story in a way that just makes it better, more accessible.

**Dan:** It might be worth mentioning, I think, that this will be the most elaborate production this show has ever received. The original production at Playwrights' Horizons was tiny. The McCarter is the biggest space it's probably ever played. We have an actor who has lived with this piece for decades. This degree of craft and how sharp these characters are drawn is stuff that he's worked on, maybe just subconsciously, but since he first saw the original production in 1981. You're going to get the real, fullest realization of this thing anybody has ever seen.

## Interview *Herringbone* Creators Tom Cone, Skip Kennon, and Ellen Fitzhugh

### Playwright Tom Cone

**The idea for *Herringbone* is such an original story. Can you talk a little bit about how you got the idea?**

I'm embarrassed to say it was simply I was sitting in my bathtub and I thought of the first line of the play and that was it.

**And from there it just flowed?**

I wrote the play in about a week. It then had a history before it evolved into what you're producing at McCarter. It premiered as a one-act play in 1975 in Vancouver, BC and went on to represent British Columbia at the cultural Olympics in Montreal, even though it was a play about America. It had had a television special with the CBC TV; it went on a national tour as a one-act play and it ended up at the Olympics. When it was there I realized that I didn't want a one-man play, I really felt I could get more out of what I was trying to say.

I really wanted to write a play as a kind of a gift to the United States from my vantage point, having been a draft dodger and having lived here [in Canada] for the first eight years before amnesty. The vantage point of being here gave me the feel of a terrible compromise, almost like a tragic compromise that I think that we all have to deal with either personally or politically. So I wrote this tragedy for this kid. I have my own background: I was a child actor in Miami, Florida, going to theater school and being in plays for about 12 years and really being under the thumb of some demonic directors.

I really felt that it was best to write it as one person performing 10 roles. Then when I decided, after it had had this tour and been performed at the Olympics, to make it into a full length piece, I wanted it through composed as opposed to just inserting anecdotal music of some period. Some people like to couch the play in a kind of vaudeville context, but I disagree with that. I think that even though its history is attached to vaudeville, you would never see the kind of act [that *Herringbone* is performing] in vaudeville. Ironically, the closest thing [to our play] that occurred I didn't know about until, I think, the production at Playwrights Horizon. The actor David Rounds was doing research and found--it was so bizarre--a little article on Ethel Barrymore having performed multiple roles on vaudeville circuits as a nine year old. So she was performing little 10 and 15 minute plays and that seemed to work for me historically. But the idea that *Herringbone* was just cheap jokes and it was based on certain rhythms or physical comedy, I wasn't interested in that, so I played against the genre.

The original producer was the great actress Colleen Dewhurst, and she and her partner Ken Marsolais brought me to New York and suggested that I meet Skip Kennon and Ellen Fitzhugh, with my idea that I wanted to have it through composed and taken to another level, and drive the actor even more crazy. So we slowly worked very carefully to transform the play.

I was blessed by Ellen Fitzhugh and Skip Kennon. We had this idea right from the beginning that we wanted to do this as if it was written by one person. We wanted to have a kind of seamless quality and we didn't want to do stop-go. We wanted the music to push the narrative as well as the book pushing the narrative. And we had our issues, because I had never written a book before. All the compromises that you have to make are extremely difficult, but Ellen Fitzhugh translated scenes that I had created, and maybe either finished or started, or I was the bookends of the scene, and she was the middle, but it seemed like we were of the same voice. We both were Southerners—she's from Arkansas and I'm from Miami, FL, and my family is from Nashville, TN, and we really click like mad, and that was really helpful to me.

**How did audiences respond to the piece?**

[The early production in] Chicago was the most wild draft that we had and they were ecstatic. One night we had 200 psychiatrists in – you can well imagine what the talkback was like.

I really wanted to write a different type of a musical. I wanted to put it within the scope of the psychology of a character and have him have to deal with all of those issues. From my point of view, the drama that takes place is really in the narrator's hands. The other thing was that—and I don't care if anyone does this, this is just me—I felt that [the narrator] had to do this every night, he has to tell that nightmare otherwise he'd be a dead person. He has to do that to stay above water. And I think we all have issues [like that], whatever they are.

## **Composer Skip Kennon**

### **How did you get involved in this project?**

Many years ago Ken Marsolais and Colleen Dewhurst held an option on a small musical of mine. They also held an option on Tom Cone's one-act play *Herringbone* and proposed to Tom that he make a musical of it. When Tom said let's pursue the idea, Ken and Colleen approached me and asked me if I was interested in doing the score. After I read it, I said I'm crazy enough to do the music but I'm not crazy enough to do the lyrics - but I know someone who is. I proposed the lyric writer Ellen Fitzhugh and we auditioned for Tom and the rest is history. By the way, Tom's play only got us to the Hollywood segment, the rest of the story was arrived at through collaboration and of course Tom's approval - with a few of the older characters and scenes dropped along the way.

### **What makes the story of Herringbone good material for a musical?**

Characters who have big wants and great needs and big obstacles to achieving them and getting them met. Also lots of events and ups and downs. One arc plays, movies, or stories usually don't make good musicals because you need twists and turns to create new situations to write a varied score.

### **Can you talk about the challenges and rewards of orchestrating a piece for only three instruments?**

"Herringbone" is a musical in the form of an act. Acts are usually performed with piano, bass and drums and sometimes small bands. Colleen and Ken promised me that after the first production of "Herringbone" at the St. Nicholas Theatre in Chicago I could have a trio.

At St. Nick's we only had piano - there was no room for anything else. Too bad, because bass adds a bottom and a buoyancy and percussion adds groove and drive. And all three together sound like a classy act like at the Algonquin or the Carlisle. To me piano alone sounds like a rehearsal - not a performance - and it looks like the producers are cheap. I didn't get my trio at the New York premiere at Playwrights Horizons. It was a tiny stage and again there was no room. And I believe the lukewarm critical response to the score at Playwrights was reflected in that incompleteness. The last three productions I've seen of the show have used the trio and the score really came

alive. "Orchestrating" is too high falutin' a word for what I did. I just added the drums that were always in my head when I was writing the music and wrote out the bass part that is inherent in the piano score which doesn't change in either the solo or trio version.

**You played "Thumbs DuBois" in Herringbone when it was a Playwrights Horizons. Can you talk a little bit about that character-- how the accompanist is actually a part of the story.**

Well, Tom, Ellen and the director Ben Levit didn't want me to play "Thumbs DuBois" at either St. Nicholas or Playwrights. Tom and Ben wanted a middle-aged black pianist for the look of the show. I was not black or at the time middle-aged. Ellen's very good reason for me not playing was that she wanted me free to observe the show and do rewrites with her as they came up. Like most composers I just wanted someone who could play the score spiritedly and accurately. But fate and money played against us. The score is tricky, technically difficult and quite specific - I really write out what I want. The pianist hired to play at St. Nicholas, after not improving for weeks, tearfully came up to the director one day and said, "I'll never be able to play this. I just don't understand why you don't have Skip do it." Well, there was no time for a replacement, so I did. At Playwrights, we auditioned black middle-aged pianists and there were two fabulous ones - but no way were they going to work for what Playwrights paid. Then we went after any middle-aged pianists - those who could play it wouldn't work for the small money. Finally, a very inebriated pianist came in to play a few bars of the piece we'd given everyone to audition with. He messed up terribly and then looked angrily at me and bellowed, "Who do you f---- think you are, Leonard Bernstein?!" That was enough for the director. He turned to me and said, "You're playing the show!"

Now, to finally answer your question. In my mind Thumbs and George Herringbone have been together for years performing. Thumbs knows the act backwards and forwards and knows when something is different, special, on the verge of falling apart, a line faltering, the audience responding especially well to something, and the list goes on and on. He may have even written or arranged the music for this autobiographical act that Herringbone wrote. He's there for George Herringbone to share things with: Didn't I play that scene really well tonight? Hey, the audience really got that, didn't they? Vamp for me, will you; I'm a little emotional here. Oh-oh, I nearly screwed that one up. Thumbs truly cares about Herringbone and how he wends his way through this brutal psychological maze every night. He knows why Herringbone needs to do it and supports him as best he can.

## **Lyricist Ellen Fitzhugh**

**How did you get involved with HERRINGBONE?**

I'd just moved to New York from Los Angeles and met up with Skip, whom I'd known from the L.A. BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop. He said he'd been offered a one-man play for musicalizing and asked if I'd be interested in reading it to see if I wanted to write the lyrics.

**What were your first impressions of the piece?**

As I was reading Tom's play, I recognized almost immediately that it was like nothing else in theater. I'd stop reading intermittently and pace around, mumbling to myself, "Nobody else gets to do this... nobody... nobody but me gets to do this...."

**As a lyricist, how do you collaborate with the book writer (and composer) on creating characters?**

The *Herringbone* characters were already created, but to weave them through an adventure which would now be told in song as well as book has required innumerable hours... weeks... years?... of intense discussion, role-playing, insistence, compromise, faltering, discovery, moodiness, congratulations and just about every conceivable kind of creative interaction.

*Herringbone* wasn't unique in being developed through this sort of collaborative heaven/hell, but it was unique in that each creative participant seemed "possessed" by the desire to come up with something even more theatrically outrageous than any of the rest of the crew could imagine.

Initially, these sessions often involved not only Tom, Skip and me, but our original director and choreographer, Ben Levit and Ted Pappas, respectively. Soon, our actor, David Rounds, was a contributing force, as well. That's a lot of "Yeah, well wait'll ya hear THIS idea!" going on, and from quite diverse perspectives.

**How does the "voice" that is speaking relate to the "voice" that is singing?**

It's important to me to thread into lyric content all the mannerisms, vocabulary, speech rhythms, accents and verbal/emotional idiosyncracies which exist for that character in the libretto. Fortunately, *Herringbone* characters gave me a lot of variety to work with.

**How did you decide where there should be songs, and what they should be about?**

These weren't *decisions*, in the usual sense of that word. Very little was measured, considered, weighed and concretized by committee in advance of the writing. (I don't like to have a lot of outside input into what the lyric content will be.) These choices were, in large part, "eruptions" of ideas which were then pretty immediately implemented into sung material. If everybody later agreed that the resulting song served the piece well, it stayed. If not, another approach would be taken, and maybe it would be sung in the same spot by the same character, or maybe wildly not.

**Did you and Skip work together, or did he write music for lyrics or vice versa?**

Mostly we worked in the same room; together, back and forth, we incrementally built the songs.

# EDUCATORS INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the McCarter Audience Resource Guide Educator Edition for our 2008-2009 season-opening production of *Herringbone*. This guide has been assembled to complement both your students' theater-going experience as well as your class curriculum by offering a variety of interesting and engaging activities for both pre-show and post-performance instruction and enjoyment.

This production of *Herringbone* affords opportunities for enrichment in theater, history, music, and dance. Before experiencing the highly theatrical nature of the one-person show, students will have the opportunity explore and contemplate the challenges of the unique form through the study and viewing of other examples of solo performance pieces. They will embark upon investigations into the historical period of the Great Depression as well as the American popular entertainment form of vaudeville from which the authors of the play drew their contextual inspiration. Following the performance, students will consider, analyze and evaluate textual and subtextual themes presented by the production, such as childhood, family bonds and dynamics, greed, exploitation, the search for identity, and depression as metaphor. They will reflect upon the performance both in terms of its virtuosic performer and in terms of the effectiveness of the various elements of production, including design elements as well as music and choreography.

Our student audiences are often our most engaging audiences at McCarter, and we encourage you and your students to join us for a discussion with performer BD Wong after the performance. Our visiting artists are always impressed with the preparation and thoughtfulness of McCarter's young audiences, and this post-performance discussion will offer a unique opportunity for students to engage intellectually with an award-winning professional theater practitioner. We look forward to seeing all of you for a wonderful discussion about the amazingly entertaining and complex *Herringbone*.

## CORE CURRICULUM STANDARDS

According to the NJ Department of Education, "experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education." Our production of *Herringbone* and the activities outlined in this guide are designed to enrich your students' education by addressing the following specific Core Curriculum Standards for Visual and Performing Arts:

- 1.1 All students will acquire knowledge and skills that increase aesthetic awareness in dance, music, theater and visual arts.
- 1.3 All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dance, music, theater, and visual arts.

- 1.4 All students will demonstrate knowledge of the process of critique.
- 1.5 All students will identify the various historical, social and cultural influences and traditions which have generated artistic accomplishments throughout the ages and which continue to shape contemporary arts.

Viewing *Herringbone* and then participating in the pre- and post-show discussions suggested in this audience guide will also address the following Core Curriculum Standards in Language Arts Literacy:

- 3.2 All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
- 3.3 All students will speak in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
- 3.4 All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.
- 3.5 All students will access, view, evaluate and respond to print, non-print and electronic texts and resources.

In addition, the production of *Herringbone* as well as the audience guide activities will help to fulfill the following Social Studies Core Curriculum Standards:

- 6.1 All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography and economics.
- 6.6 All students will apply knowledge of spatial relationships and geographic skills to understand human behavior in relation to the physical and cultural environment.

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION, QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION, AND ACTIVITIES

*Note to Educators: Use the following assignments, questions, and activities to introduce your students to Herringbone and its intellectual and artistic origins, context, and themes, as well as to engage their imaginations and creativity before they see the production.*

1. **THE CRASH, THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE, AND CHILD STARS: CONTEXTUALIZING HERRINGBONE.** The story of *Herringbone* utilizes both situationally and metaphorically the socio-political and economic milieu of the Great Crash and the Great Depression, and incorporates vaudeville as both a detail of setting and an element of theatrical style. Although one needn't have any familiarity with any of

these contextual constituents to understand and enjoy *Herringbone*, their inclusion as foundational ingredients allows for interesting (and in some cases curiously or surprisingly intriguing) avenues for student investigatory research. Topics for study might include those listed in the “Vaudeville Variety” and “Well-Known Vaudevillians” sidebars found in this audience guide or the following additional subjects:

- Causes of the Great Depression
  - The Gold Standard
  - Stock Market Crash of 1929
  - Banking panics
  - Smoot-Hawley Tarriff Act
- Effects of the Great Depression in America
- Herbert Hoover’s response
- Franklin D. Roosevelt’s response
- Tony Pastor
- Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward F. Albee
- Black Americans in Vaudeville and TOBA
- Burlesque
- The Duncan Sisters
- The Cherry Sisters
- Regurgitators Hadji Ali and Stevie Starr
- Leopoldo Fregoli and protean acts
- Baby Rose Marie
- The Three Keatons
- The Gerry Society/NYSPCC
- Jackie Coogan and the Coogan Bill/Act

Have your students choose and teach one another about one of the above or group topics via oral and/or illustrated (i.e., posters or PowerPoint) reports. Following the presentations, ask your students to reflect upon their research process and discoveries.

**2. GOING SOLO ON THE AMERICAN STAGE: AN EXPLORATION OF ONE-PERSON SHOWS.**

To prepare your students for *Herringbone* and deepen their level of understanding and appreciation of the one-person show tradition, familiarize them with a variety of solo performances pieces that they can view (and perhaps read), analyze, and discuss. First, utilize the brief article “A ‘Cast of One’: The History, Art, and Nature of the One-Person Show” found in this audience guide as a jumping -off point for your group exploration. Then, compare and contrast two or three of the following plays (most titles are available both in print and on VHS and/or DVD; a few may be available at your local library):

*The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce  
*Mark Twain Tonight!*, Hal Holbrook  
*Swimming to Cambodia*, Spaulding Gray  
*Monster in a Box*, Spaulding Gray  
*Fires in the Mirror*, *Crown Heights*, *Brooklyn*, Anna Deavere Smith  
*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Anna Deavere Smith  
*Elaine Stritch At Liberty*, Elaine Stritch (includes adult content /language)  
*The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Jane Wagner  
 (Direct from Broadway:) *Whoopi Goldberg*, Whoopi Goldberg

- Following each individual viewing:

- Have students journal (free write) a personal response to the work of art.
  - Then ask them to journal about what they noticed about the work or where they found meaning (e.g. ask them to indicate what they found stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, challenging, compelling, delightful, different, unique, or meaningful).
  - Ask them to share their thoughts in an open discussion.
- Continuing the discussion:
    - Ask your students to identify the mode and form of each one-person show they view.
    - Ask them if their viewing of the work of art gave them any insights into the pleasures and challenges of the one-person show form.
    - Have students consider if the story of the play is suited only to a solo performance format. In other words, could they conceive of the play's story in a more conventionally dramatic or theatrically expanded form (e.g., telling the story through the interaction of multiple characters, utilizing several actors to tell the story, using dialogue instead of monologue)? How would a different format change the theatrical experience for both actor and audience?
    - If students have the opportunity to view more than a single one-person show, ask them to compare and contrast the plays, the performers and performance styles.
3. **A THEATER REVIEWER PREPARES.** A theater critic or reviewer is essentially a “professional audience member,” whose job is to report the news, in detail, of a play's production and performance through active and descriptive language for a target audience of readers (e.g., their peers, their community, or those interested in the arts). To prepare your students to write an accurate, insightful and compelling theater review following their attendance at Herringbone prime them for the task by discussing the three basic elements of a theatrical review: reportage, analysis and judgment.
- Reportage is concerned with the basic information of the production, or the journalist's “four w's” (i.e., who, what, where, when), as well as the elements of production, which include the text, setting, costumes, lighting, sound, acting and directing (see the [Theater Reviewer's Checklist](#)). When reporting upon these observable phenomena of production, the reviewer's approach should be factual, descriptive and objective; any reference to quality or effectiveness should be reserved for the analysis section of the review.
  - With analysis the theater reviewer segues into the realm of the subjective and attempts to interpret the artistic choices made by the director and designers and the effectiveness not of these choices; specific moments, ideas and images from the production are considered in the analysis.

- Judgment involves the reviewer's opinion as to whether the director's and designers' intentions were realized, and if their collaborative, artistic endeavor was ultimately a worthwhile one. Theater reviewers always back up their opinions with reasons, evidence and details.

Remind your students that the goal of a theater reviewer is “to **see** accurately, **describe** fully, **think** clearly, and then (and only then) to **judge** fairly the merits of the work” (Thaiss and Davis, *Writing for the Theatre*, 1999). Proper analytical preparation before the show and active listening and viewing during will result in the effective writing and crafting of their reviews.

4. **CHECK IT OUT: HERRINGBONE ON THE MCCARTER BLOG.** Either as a class or individually, have your students access McCarter's web site (<http://www.mccarter.org>) to investigate news and information about *Herringbone* and its production process on McCarter Theatre Blog. To access *Herringbone* related postings, go directly to <http://www.mccarter.org/blog/index.php> and select “Herringbone” under “Categories” on the left side of the web page. The blog has been designed to connect McCarter Theatre and its staff (production, literary, artistic, education, etc.) with subscribers, students, educators and anyone interested in reading and writing about theater, and it provides an up-to-the-minute forum for news and information on McCarter plays in pre-production, rehearsal, and performance. Post a comment or pose a question based on either previous bloggers' entries or on your own pre-show preparatory studies.

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION, QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION, AND ACTIVITIES

*Note to Educators: Use the following assignments, questions, and activities to have students evaluate their experience of the performance of Herringbone, as well as to encourage their own imaginative and artistic projects through further exploration of the play in production. Consider also that some of the pre-show activities might enhance your students' experience following the performance.*

1. **EXPLORING THE TEXTUAL AND SUBTEXTUAL THEMES OF HERRINGBONE.** When attempting to describe the play *Herringbone* to a person who has not yet seen it, one might say that it is, dramatically speaking, a dark musical comedy about an eight-year-old boy growing up during the Great Depression who is possessed by the spirit of a dead vaudeville performer and taken on the road by his parents to help the family. Thematically speaking, one might explain that the play is about show business, familial bonds and dynamics, childhood, exploitation, greed, and revenge. To its creative team of Director Roger Rees and BD Wong, *Herringbone* is “a play that is not at all what it seems.” For one, they note the presence of subtextual themes, such as “depression as metaphor,” “the construction of or search for identity,” and “the nature of performance itself” which they feel add greater

complexity to the experience of the play. Explore the textual and subtextual themes of *Herringbone* with your students with the following writing and discussion activities:

- Ask your students to journal a response to the following question: Having experienced *Herringbone* in performance, how would you describe the story of the play to someone who has not yet seen it? Have them share their descriptions.
- Next, ask your students to brainstorm a list of themes, ideas, or motifs they detected in *Herringbone*. Ask students to identify moments from the play in which each theme was explored. Ask students if they can personally identify or connect with any of play's themes. Have them explain their responses.
- Have your students read (aloud as a group or individually) Literary Manager Carrie Hughes' interview with BD Wong and Roger Rees found in this audience guide. Immediately following their reading, ask them to journal about anything that stood out to them in the interview as compelling, interesting, evocative, confusing, challenging, or meaningful. Ask them to explain in detail their response. Discuss your responses as a class.
- If these subtextual themes have not come up as a result of the previous activities or discussion, ask them to consider how depression as metaphor, the construction of or search for identity, or the drive to perform were made manifest in the performance of *Herringbone* they experienced.

2. **HERRINGBONE: DISCUSSING THE PRODUCTION AND ITS VARIOUS ELEMENTS.** Following their attendance at the performance of *Herringbone*, ask your students to reflect on the questions below. You might choose to have them answer each individually, or you may divide students into groups for round-table discussions. Have them consider each question, record their answers, and then share their responses with the rest of the class.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT THE PLAY IN PRODUCTION

- a. What was your overall reaction to *Herringbone*? Did you find the production compelling? Stimulating? Intriguing? Challenging? Memorable? Confusing? Evocative? Unique? Delightful? Meaningful? Explain your reactions.
- b. Did experiencing the play heighten your awareness or understanding of the play's themes (e.g., show business, familial bonds and dynamics, childhood, exploitation, and greed, and revenge, depression as metaphor, the construction of/search for identity, the drive to perform)? What themes were made even more apparent in performance? Explain your responses.
- c. Do you think that the pace and tempo of the production were effective and appropriate? Explain your opinion.
- d. Did you find the elements of music and dance to be integral to the production as a whole? Explain your thoughts.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

- a. Did you personally identify with George or any of the other characters in *Herringbone*? Who? Why?
- b. What memorable qualities or character traits were revealed by the action and speech of the characters? Explain your ideas.
- c. Did young George undergo a transformation during the course of the play? If so, how would you describe his transformation? What caused this transformation? Does the adult Herringbone undergo a transformation during the course of telling the story from his childhood?
- d. In what ways did the characters reveal the themes of the play? Explain your responses.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT THE STYLE AND DESIGN OF THE PRODUCTION

- a. Was there a moment in *Herringbone* that was so compelling or intriguing that it remains with you in your mind's eye? Can you write a vivid description of that moment? As you write your description, pretend that you are writing about the moment for someone who was unable to experience the performance.
- b. Did the style and design elements of the production enhance the performance? Did anything specifically stand out to you? Explain your reaction.
- c. How did the production style and design reflect the themes of the play?
- d. What mood or atmosphere did the lighting design establish or achieve? Explain your experience.
- e. Did the music, songs, and choreography serve to illuminate the characters, themes, and style of the play? How?

3. **A WONG-MAN SHOW.** The role of Herringbone is a part which requires what theater professionals refer to as a “tour de force” performer, that is, an actor with great talent, skill, stamina, virtuosity, and psychological strength or confidence. It is the performer’s ultimate challenge, and it is reasonable to say that not just any actor could take on such a role. Certainly BD Wong is not just any ordinary actor. *Herringbone* director Roger Rees has described him as a “quadruple threat”—not only a talented actor, singer, and dancer, but also, a “riveting human presence on stage.” Ask your students to reflect upon BD Wong’s performance in *Herringbone* and the one-person show form and its challenges using the following questions:

- What did you find compelling, exciting, surprising, confounding, or worth noting about BD Wong’s performance in *Herringbone*?
- What one moment of Wong’s performance stands out foremost in your mind when you think of *Herringbone*? Describe that moment in detail and explain why you think it remains foremost in your thoughts.
- What were the pleasures of watching Wong embody the many characters in the play?
- Was there anything that didn’t work for you in the performance of the piece? Explain your response.

- What in the nature of *Herringbone* (e.g., narrative, theme, characters) recommends it as or requires that it be a solo performance piece? Explain your answer.
  - What would be lost theatrically or thematically if *Herringbone* were expanded into a play for multiple characters, if anything? Explain your response.
4. **BLOG ALL ABOUT IT! *HERRINGBONE* AFTER THE SHOW.** McCarter is very interested in carrying on the conversation about *Herringbone* with you and your students after you've left the theater. Have them post a post-show comment on their experience of the play in performance on the McCarter Theatre Blog. To access the blog go to <http://www.mccarter.org/blog/index.php>, select "Citizen Responses" under "Categories" on the left side of the web page, and then post your comment. See you on the blog!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Gentile, John S. *Cast of One: One-Person Shows from the Chautauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1989.
- Kenrick, John. "A History of the Musical: Vaudeville, Part II." *The Cyber Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre, TV, and Film*. 1997-2008. <http://www.musicals101.com/vaude2.htm> (accessed July 19, 2008).
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- McConachie, Bruce. "Vaudeville." *The Oxford Companion to United States History*. Paul S. Boyer, ed. Oxford University Press 2001. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Princeton University. (accessed July 18, 2008).
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- Trav S.D. *No Applause—Just Throw Money*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Young, Jordan R. *Acting Solo: The Art of One-Man Shows*. Beverly Hills, California: Moonstone Press, 1989.