



**CENTERSTAGE** has never been afraid of a challenge. Known for its imaginative takes on new and classic plays, the theater has been shaking things up on stage for its entire 46-year history. Now, in the middle of a global economic meltdown and the most challenging funding environment in its history, CENTERSTAGE is putting that reputation for smart, bold thinking to work by re-imagining its entire season structure—redistributing its resources over a wider variety of productions, events, and theatrical styles. The new season reflects the masterful balance of adventure and pragmatism that distinguishes both CENTERSTAGE and Artistic Director Irene Lewis.



Above (clockwise from top): Natalie Venetia Bekon and Robert Montano in *Fabulation* or *The Re-education of Oswald*; Michael Braun, Kate Turnbull, Keri Setaro, and Garrett Neergaard in *The Matchmaker*; and Andrew Weems and Deborah Hedwall in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

# "THEATRICAL TAPAS"

Artistic Director Irene Lewis and Resident Dramaturg Gavin Witt talk about the challenges and opportunities that have led them to create a new and different kind of season at CENTERSTAGE

INTERVIEW BY  
CARRIE OLEYNIK

Irene Lewis, CENTERSTAGE's Artistic Director since 1992, first considered developing a more varied programming lineup more than a year ago, with the notion of implementing the plan over two or three years. But not long after the conversation started with her resident artistic team, the global economic crisis—and CENTERSTAGE's history of strictly balanced budgets—required a radical revision of the theater's production budget. Out of financial necessity, Lewis proposed quickly taking the season in a new artistic direction.

**Q:** The 2009-10 Season will be a departure from your usual six-play format. It will feature four full-length productions, two fully produced one-hour plays, three concert-style readings, and a recurring cabaret series, plus a "holiday" show. How did you go about developing this unusual array of work?

**Lewis:** We don't ask, "What do they want to see?" Instead we ask, "What do we want to work on?" and hope for a following. It's terribly important that the programming interests Gavin and me and the rest of the dramaturg, because if we can't communicate our enthusiasm and we don't love what we're working on, there's really no point. But we are also trying to give the same quality experience that we have always given, even with reduced resources.

So after much consideration—including a board retreat and consultation with some leading artists kind enough to share their ideas—I came up with this new model. It has some of everything, with a range of styles and forms in different formats. We're trying new things, like a wonderful series of musical cabarets, and will have three readings that will be highly transparent—we're inviting the audience in from the first reading right through the process. [British playwright] Kwame Kwei-Armah, one of our Associate Artists, gave us the idea to try one-hour plays. That's when we started to think about people coming by, maybe on their way home from work, to sample a shorter theatrical experience.

**Witt:** We did a considerable survey. Thousands of responses were virtually

unanimous in stating that people were eager to try these new formats, like coming to a one-act play or an evening of shorts. These are not going to be a huge commitment. When the show's out, you can go have dinner or a drink with friends, or go home. You can either start your evening or end your day with it. They were also highly encouraging about the idea of having expanded choice, to curate their own experience more directly. There isn't a Mainstage/second stage hierarchy here—just many tiers of different styles of expression. We talk about it as theatrical tapas—the idea of samplings of varied styles and scales.

**Q:** Irene, you generally go back and forth to New York. How does that inform the work brought to the theater?

**Lewis:** A lot of the work for this theater is done in New York, where I also have a home. For instance, I'll meet with a playwright, or I'll go see her show; I hold auditions there, and meet with designers, most of whom live or are based there. My husband lives and works there. When I came to CENTERSTAGE as acting artistic director, I hadn't planned to stay. But it's kind of a seductive institution; very few people leave CENTERSTAGE. The artist is central here. Another attraction for me was its enlightened board, which is very sensitive to and respectful of artistic impulses.



**Witt:** As Irene said, the artist is central to everything we do. At the same time, we're lucky: Baltimore audiences are incredibly literate, wood hungry, and passionate about challenging material, which in turn has allowed us to pursue what we are passionate about as an artistic team. We challenge ourselves, and they respond. We have an incredibly diverse audience base to play to, which means we have a wider range of options in selecting material.

**Q:** How does working within a tighter budget affect your artistic decisions?

**Lewis:** When I saw the set budgets [for next year], for example, they were not the kinds of budgets we are used to. So I thought, "How do you get something creative within a different scope?" As with the season in general, what I don't want to do is just offer a watered-down, thinned-out version of our usual. One of my ideas is to try a "unit set," one basic design consistent throughout the season. That is, you see the set of the first show, then when you come to the second show you see a piece of the set from the first show. And maybe you realize there are elements of coming shows as well. As the season progresses, you peel away, and you can see different parts of the set in front of you.

**Q:** The cabaret series will be a first for audiences at CENTERSTAGE. Where did that idea come from?

**Lewis:** Debbie Chinn, our new managing director, invited some of us to a dinner at her house. E. Faye Butler, an Associate Artist who performed in this season's *Caroline, or Change*, and Ken Roberson, a choreographer and director who's been a frequent collaborator, started to talk about a cabaret, out of enthusiasm for the idea and a passionate commitment to CENTERSTAGE as an institution. E. Faye said she would help us wrap our minds around it, and a few months later, she did. She suggested starting small, and growing slowly. So, at first it's going to be four weekends spread out through the year. That could be her singing Rodgers and Hammerstein standards, or Tracie Thoms coming to do a more contemporary set, or Charlotte Cohen singing Gershwin. And you could have an MC, maybe a local celebrity, which would be fun. And we're going to reconfigure The Head Theater into an intimate, cabaret-style setting, with a bar and a fabulous array of wines and beers.

**Witt:** The idea of the Cabarets is that they're not all the same kind of thing. It could be rock opera, or jazz standards, or something else entirely. Something that continues to explore and expand the way we experience what it means to come to live theater.

**Q:** Can you share some highlights of the 2009-10 Season?

**Lewis:** Downstairs in The Pearlstone Theater, we have four shows: Longtime CENTERSTAGE actor Larry O'Dwyer will play Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*; *Around the World in 80 Days* with the Lookingglass Theatre Company from Chicago; the American premiere of Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Let There Be Love*; and August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* with E. Faye Butler. The idea is that these will be the most substantial offerings, and feature some of our Associate Artists.

We have many choices for the concert readings. I'd like for them to represent different cultures, to have an international flavor representing the best new writing. Many performers have voiced interest in the Cabarets, but I think for the first year we are going to concentrate on those who have been here, who the audience knows, and then we'll branch out. We are adding David Sedaris' very funny piece *The*

*Sentimental Diaries* at the holidays—again featuring an Associate Artist, Robert Dorfman. Out of the two Short Work slots, one will be a three-actor version of *Grisso de Bergen*, a fun and different type of theatrical experience. We're still reading a selection of options for the other slot at this point, but I expect to offer some very current writers with a variety of perspectives.

**Witt:** Ultimately, the filter is the same for all of these: Can we come up with a diverse selection of material that is all of the highest quality, that surprises and challenges us and audiences, and that offers questions instead of answers?

**Q:** How will the new season impact the future creative direction of CENTERSTAGE?

**Lewis:** I think change is healthy. Risk is healthy. Theater is a living organism, so what doesn't work, you change. The signature of CENTERSTAGE is quality. And with the new season, you will get that—and what I hope will be an interesting range of theatrical choices.

**Witt:** The new model begins to build and expand a structure that we hope we'll be able to explore more down the road. It also starts to accustom us to more logistical and artistic flexibility, building a range of exploration that's even wider and more exciting and more stimulating for us all.



Photograph by Richard Anderson



## ON STAGE AND ONLINE

CENTERSTAGE's fresh face on the Web

The structure of the season isn't the only thing that's changing at CENTERSTAGE. This spring, the theater will launch a brand new website, full of behind-the-scenes information and interactive tools to connect artists and audiences. Keep watching [www.centerstage.org](http://www.centerstage.org) for the spring 2009 unveiling.