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FEATURES

As the Globe Warms, a Woodbury Solo Pays Attention

by Dani Oliver | August 8, 2012



Heather Woodbury

In the early '80s, when 17-year-old Heather Woodbury showed up in Manhattan, she found a hotbed for experimental performance in the East Village. But the island wasn't as literally hot as it is 30 years later, when ascending temperatures are frequently attributed to man-made global warming, when it's difficult to dismiss the notion that rising waters from melting icecaps might eventually inundate parts of Manhattan.

Woodbury is now using the performance skills she learned back in the '80s in the East Village to address the subject of climate change — and more — in her solo performance serial *As the Globe Warms*, which arrives at REDCAT this week as part of the New Original Works Festival.

Pre-NYC, Woodbury grew up in Northern California. She remembers wanting to be a writer from “a strangely early age” and was introduced to acting through a *commedia dell'arte*-based improvisational theater group for teenagers. The improv work fed into her desire to author her own material, and the performance aspect simply “seduced” her. She arrived in New York City with both of these in mind, and she was energized by what she found in the East Village. “All you needed was a microphone and a light bulb,” she says with a smile.

Woodbury cites an earlier wave of performance art heavily inspired by the visual arts, in which performances were often explorations of “visceral rituals.” Her own generation was a bit more pop-culture inspired, with much of its imagery influenced by television, and a lot of its chutzpah derived

from rock and roll.

"I think I blended that with my literary bent, which was character-based storytelling," she says. "And I think it took me a while to figure out how to blend those two things. I would do these [pieces] that were thematically unified, but they would be anywhere from 15 minutes to 45 minutes long. And I would use my facility for characters, and accents, and the characters would sort of bounce off one another. But the characters wouldn't return."

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A shift in Woodbury's performances occurred in the '90s, when a friend dared her to create a new show every week¹ for nine months straight. She rose to the challenge. Thirty-seven weeks and 37 performances later, she found herself with a wealth of material and an evolving narrative style. "That's when I sort of tricked myself into writing that novel," she says, referring to *What Ever: An American Odyssey*. But she quickly adds, "When I say novel, I don't want to mislead people. Because it's not like I'm reading from a novel, not like there's a narrative voice"² it's all people talking."

What Ever: An American Odyssey, a solo performance in eight parts, toured internationally and received rave reviews. Woodbury interviewer Jason Zinoman in the *New York Times* called the piece "one of the masterworks of the solo form." An excerpt from it became part of an episode of public radio's *This American Life*.

It's precisely Woodbury's form that's so intriguing. Her work has been called a "performance novel" and referred to as an "epic soap opera." It's episodic, character-heavy, and deals with larger social themes. Woodbury says it has a lot in common with serial fiction of the 19th century — and now, cable-style serial television. "It's interesting how the form has developed in the popular culture. When I did the first one of these in '94 or '95, that wasn't really on TV, and now it's *really* going on." She mentions the television drama, *Lost*, and posits that people are more willing now to engage with that level of complexity in storytelling.

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"It's that engagement with each other," says Woodbury. "That the people who are partaking of a particular story are actually interacting with each other." She compares it to the creative life of Dickens, who often read chapters of his latest novels in the back of pubs. "People literally rioted on the docks, waiting to get the next installment."

After *What Ever: An American Odyssey*, Woodbury created the piece, *Tale of 2 Cities: An American Joyride*. Originally an 11-hour series, it was distilled to around five hours and performed by an ensemble cast, eventually winning an Obie in 2007 for ensemble performance. Her pieces, she says, have all been formed in a similar way. Each installment takes a couple days to write, a few days to put to memory, and then is performed in front of an audience. "Whatever I forgot," she says, "I would improvise."

This week, Woodbury will perform a shortened version of the sixth episode of her newest, 12-part piece, *As the Globe Warms*, in REDCAT's festival. She developed much of *As the Globe Warms* at the Bootleg Theater in early 2011, and before that, at Echo Curio gallery in Echo Park.

As she was beginning the workshops at the Bootleg, she told *laist* interviewer Terry Morgan that she had been talking to an ecologist friend, who was “drawn to this new environmental art, which generally has visual artists doing it. She was saying there have to be advocates for the environmental cause who aren’t only scientists or lawyers or professional political activists...It shouldn’t just be consigned to the world of concrete ideas, it has to be in the world of the imagination and poetry and the ineffable emotional things that we can’t articulate any other way. One impetus was these little frogs I read about in a book about global warming that are gone now. Just looking at that photograph of the frog and realizing it doesn’t exist anymore...The more science I read, the more disturbed I became by what’s going on with the destruction of our habitat and the habitat of so many other critters. And the comedy of human beings continuing to have their politics and soap opera with each other as the globe warms...[this] is a way I can throw myself wholeheartedly into a cause that I care about very much and articulate it in a way that was more satisfying to me than perhaps going on a march in Washington, DC.”

Now, as she speaks about the project, she enthusiastically outlines a world that seems to exist in three strands.

First, a handsome herpetologist arrives in the fictional town of Vane Springs, Nevada, attempting to save the butterscotch frog and its habitat. Second, a working-class family of women (all with similar names) raises questions about the extinction of the working class in America. And third, an evangelical Christian girl begins translating for people who are speaking in tongues at her church and subsequently begins to channel endangered animal species. “It’s about how all of these people converge in the small town of Vane Springs, but also on

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the World Wide Web.” Woodbury says that *part* of the idea is the notion of all these individuals — and all of us — “fiddling, as the globe burns.”

To say that the world Woodbury has created is complex is an understatement. But when you remember that she’s doing this as a solo act — and when you hear that *As the Globe Warms* includes crowd scenes, animals, ocean/nature scenes, and sex scenes — you realize that this is the type of performance you have to see to believe, let alone visualize. Woodbury says that, because the story is so intricate, she keeps the props and set to a minimum. She always works with a microphone, but apart from that, she adheres to what she calls “an adult game of pretend.” A stage, a few chairs and, in the REDCAT performance, a bed sheet makes its debut.

As for the characters themselves, she prefers to do a thumbnail sketch of their physicality. “I think if I were to fully, physically embody everyone that I portray, it would be annoying. It would be too dense.” She focuses her attention on the voices of the characters instead, fashioning an aurally-colorful performance.

Woodbury’s very aware of her place in the tradition of storytelling. At the end of the day, she says, what she’s doing is really the oldest art form there is. “I’m just taking it back from television, which took it from 19th century serial fiction, which is really just Homer.” And she’s right — her narrative is the epic, told by one person, sharing her own personal odyssey. “I’m just putting it back through my human lens,” she says.

***As the Globe Warms* will be performed during the third week of REDCAT’s NOW Festival, August 9 ““ 11 at 8.30 pm. For more information and tickets:**

*****All “As the Globe Warms” production photos by Caroline Spitzer**

www.redcat.org/event/new-original-works-festival-2012-week-three

REDCAT: New Original Works Festival

July 26 ““August 11; Thu-Sat 8:30 pm. Tickets: \$18 general admission (\$14 students: \$10 CalArts);