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Superhero Clubhouse: the Call to Grow Theater

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By [Melissa F. Moschitto](#)

Wednesday, November 9, 8:30ish p.m. in a studio in midtown Manhattan: a rehearsal for Superhero Clubhouse's *SATURN (a play about food)* has stalled. The actors and director need the next part of script. The playwright, Jeremy Pickard—who is also the Captain of Superhero Clubhouse—e-mails out new pages. As the text materializes on their electronic devices, the performers gravitate into a circle to read the scene from the various objects they hold before them: laptops, smartphones, e-readers.



Superhero Clubhouse: Eugene Oh, Corey Johnson, Alison Marie Bryant, Danny Gardner and Brian Belcinski in *MERCURY (a play about poison)*. Photo by Rob Strong.

The replacement of paper and ink with devices and electricity: is it an ecological conundrum or an environmentally beneficial advancement?

This type of question isn't always asked, but for Superhero Clubhouse, it's de rigeur. Founded in 2007 by Jeremy Pickard, Superhero Clubhouse is a "society of theater artists engaged in making original plays and events about the natural world via a

green and collaborative process.” How they make their work is equally as important as the subject matter itself. A rehearsal room populated with handheld devices may be a solution to printing multiple versions of a script, yet it is also a manner of developing work with more fluidity. They’re measuring multiple efficiencies here as they constantly tackle large-scale issues: water pollution, mercury poisoning, ethical food production. In the process, they’re also examining an issue that theater artists are only just starting to acknowledge: how the act of creating theater can be so inherently wasteful. For Jeremy a play is “a way to realize or actualize the conversations we’re having about bigger issues.”

Weighty worldly questions might produce plodding dramas with some artists, but the work of Superhero Clubhouse is playful, inventive, and daring. There’s something, Jeremy says, “raucous and lighthearted in everything we do.” (Indeed, one of the plays is described as using “moronic humor.”) The company’s name refers to the belief that anyone who is doing service for the earth or to enlighten and educate is a superhero. It’s meant to be a place where superheroes can gather. It’s also an allusion to childhood, where a sheet can become a fortress—a sense of imagination, play, and possibility pervade.



Jeremy Pickard and Preston Copley in *NEPTUNE (a play about water)*. Photo by Rob Strong.

Sometimes the environmental issue is manifested transparently, sometimes it's opaque. Much of the work has roots in allegory and fairy tales. *NEPTUNE (a play about water)* uses Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" to talk about the impending water crisis. *MERCURY (a play about poison)* is rooted in Danbury, Connecticut, spans 500 years, and examines the relationship between toxic chemicals

and the places we live in; it is “loosely inspired by Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories” (mad tea parties, anyone?).

No matter the seed of the play, Jeremy is always searching for human stories, and often those stories reflect the artists themselves. *URANUS* (a play about waste) is the play that birthed the company. Jeremy started writing it just out of college, a time of his life shared by two of the characters, a duo of young men “discarded” by home and college after graduation and expected to now be full-fledged adults. The most recent draft of the play was produced this past spring with three storylines intertwined: William Herschel’s discovery of the planet Uranus, Gaea searching among piles of trash (and evoking the myth of Kronos), and of course, the two young men—backpackers just out of school and hoping to find themselves who are suddenly transported to a planet that is made entirely of Earth’s garbage. In something of a theatrical coup, the audience became the set designer—they were asked to bring unwanted stuff to contribute to a landscape populated by cardboard boxes, a broken lawn chair, discarded toys. The show’s website gave guidelines on what to bring, including “something baroque” and “something that still has the tag.” The concept of building a play about waste from waste provides a universe of inspiration. In a memorable sequence of images, Herschel uses a series of telescopes to discover the planet; as the play goes on, the telescopes—made of cardboard tubing - grow larger and larger until the actor is actually straddling one being carried by the ensemble. It’s this supreme sense of play that Jeremy and Superhero Clubhouse are able to engender.

Marked by an earnest desire to connect deeply with science, the company is establishing a strong presence in the science community. Lisa Phillips, Executive Director, Lenfest Center for Sustainable Energy, the Earth Institute at Columbia University, has been a strong advocate and supporter of their work. For the past two years, Phillips has invited them to the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory Open House, where they’ve created site-specific theater pieces. Their commitment to science and activism has inspired some intoxicating plans, including “Small Town, Big Change” which involves a residency tour where theatrical events will be created based on the people, culture, and ecology of a host town, in an effort to connect rural America to the global environment. Jeremy also dreams of producing an annual festival that invites performing artists of all disciplines to gather around a specific theme (e.g. bees), uniting artists, scientists, and the public.

These large plans are being nurtured by a small team. The company is led by Jeremy (Captain) and Maria Portman Kelly (First Mate), and there’s a small group of dedicated people who make up the Special Task Force (the production and administrative arm of the company). Superhero Clubhouse describes themselves an open door collective, embracing both the value of longstanding relationships as well as the transient nature of artists. They’ve also started organizing Superhero Socials—a monthly potluck of food and ideas that strives to build an expansive and diverse community, to avoid the inevitable specter of burnout, and to grow roots in what is often a rootless city.

The company’s current project, *SATURN*, began as an examination of food and what is

natural. A poignant story of a young married couple emerged, focusing the play like a microscope. The play asks: *What should we eat? Where should it come from? What is natural?* Riffing on a recent trend of hipster farmers, Jack and Rhea—both 30 years old—inherit a farm and move from the city to the country to start anew:

RHEA

You are *called* to be a farmer
To run from the office, from the cities,
From everything that is unreal
You are called to run, freewheeling
Through the thickest forest
Over the barricades of mountains
Down the hill and into the fields
Fields like golden, open arms
To turn dirt into soil
To grow.

A farm seems to be an apt metaphor for the company, with Jeremy as the farmer, tending to his different crops of plays, nurturing them, perhaps picking some just shy of having ripened, and then replanting ideas to be harvested later. Developing multiple projects simultaneously can be a logistical and financial challenge, but they use it to their advantage. The Planet Plays connect to each other through repeating characters and themes, and ultimately the development of one feeds another. With the environment, Jeremy observes, “nothing is in isolation.” With each draft of a show produced, they are moving towards their ultimate goal of producing the entire Planet Plays series in repertory by 2013; ideally at a campus or arts center with multiple performance spaces. This ambition is typical of Jeremy, whose sprightly nature often belies his intensity. *SATURN*’s director Sarah Hughes was drawn to work with him in part because, “he always works from the assumption that a solution to every problem is possible.”

This pursuit of solutions is evident in the rehearsal room, where like little planets themselves, artists orbit around the room. Two actors are huddled in conversation with Jeremy over here, set and costume designer RB Schlather is searching for visual inspirations on his laptop over there, and Sarah is staging a scene with one of the play’s three couples at the front of the room. Jeremy and Sarah are a yin and yang team, volleying back and forth to shape the play. The script they started with, Sarah says, was “65 percent finished scenes, 20 percent sketched out or outlined scenes, and 15 percent big question marks, and we have been figuring out the rest in

rehearsal, through compositions and improvs and riffs on the research we're all delving into." The work is highly collaborative with space for actors to make offers and questions—in fact, it seems implicitly expected of them. Nonetheless, this is still Jeremy's vision.

For *SATURN*, the ensemble is building choreography as they go. While I'm there, they're staging a scene which glides from dinner party to a stylized "work dance." It's intense, angry and guttural with feet stamping and arms punching, bodies squatting and jumping. The acting ensemble, an appealing mix of 20-to-30-somethings, expertly transitions, sensing each other on a cellular level. Parts of the movement vocabulary came from actual tasks the company members did over the summer (including mucking out a chicken coop, scything weeds, and turning the compost heap) during a ten-day work retreat at Full & By Farm in Essex, New York. There is a gesture of pointing and saying grace that was adopted from their host farmers, Sara and James. Jeremy throws out the term "rotational grazing" (a system of grazing that moves animals through paddocks to provide fresh pasture), and the actors nod, knowingly. Even agricultural terms have been co-opted as choreographic structure. The artistic development and really the psychology of each play are modeled off of the science it investigates, the product echoing the ecological values.

Crafted over time, with many creative partners, often constructed, deconstructed, then *reconstructed*, I wonder: Do the plays have a life beyond Superhero Clubhouse? Jeremy stumbles a bit over the answer. It might be possible, but, he clarifies, they are theatrical events, not plays. Rather than a playwright, he considers himself an event creator and theater maker. The work is so personal and the artists in the room bestow something intangible to the final product—it's difficult to imagine how it might translate to another company or group of artists who don't share the same process and ethos.

In *SATURN*, the character of Jack questions his decision to commit to a life on a farm, living by one's values yet beholden to the whims of nature:

JACK

Are we short-sighted or intoxicated with optimism?

His words may well echo Superhero Clubhouse's parallel circumstance of believing wholeheartedly in theater's power to nourish humanity in a world that's increasingly inhospitable to art. They'll make you believe, though, that this time optimism just might win.

SATURN performs December 2 – 4 at the Tank, a Manhattan venue dedicated to providing a space for performing and visual arts. Tickets: \$15 at <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/211900>. On December 4, there will be a 3p.m. pay-what-you-can matinee and a 7p.m. benefit performance and fundraiser.

Learn more about Superhero Clubhouse at www.superheroclubhouse.org

Contributor

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