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**the process:**

BY SAM HURWITT,  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Mick Mize in  
Central Works'  
production  
of *Blastosphere!*  
by Aaron Loeb and  
Geetha Reddy.

Photo: Tammy Berlin

# Central Works' Secret Formula

Since 1997,  
Central Works  
has been  
devoted to  
collaboratively  
creating  
new plays

**T**HE MOTTO OF CENTRAL WORKS, BERKELEY CITY Club's theatre in residence, doesn't quite say it all, but it does get the point across: "We make plays." Central Works started in 1991 as an actor-driven ensemble that did a number of regional premieres and a few new plays, but since 1997 the company has devoted itself entirely to its own collaborative method of creating new plays, most of them written by company codirector Gary Graves.

In recent years the group has been bringing writers from outside the company into the process, starting with Brian Thorstenson's *Shadow Crossing* in 2006 and continuing with Anne Galjour's *Bird in the Hand*, Thorstenson's *Wakefield; or, Hello Sophia*, Christopher Chen's *The Window Age* and now Aaron Loeb and Geetha Reddy's *Blastosphere!*, which opened October 24.

Rather than assembling for the first time on the first day of rehearsal, in the Central Works Method the cast and creative team is involved in the formation of the play from the beginning. When a writer signs on to develop a play with the company, the playwright is paired with a director and a date for the premiere is set. In consultation with the director, the writer devises a “point of departure,” the rough idea for the play, whether it’s turning *King Lear* into a contemporary play for three actresses (*Every Inch a King*), a sequel to a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story (*Wakefield; or, Hello Sophia*) or a comedy about fertility treatments (*Blastosphere!*). A small group of actors is cast, whether or not the characters have been conceived yet. Then the actors, director, writer and designers meet in a series of 10 three-hour workshops to brainstorm ideas, share research and eventually go over the script as the playwright begins to bring in pages.

“One of the rules of the way we work is, you’re allowed to think about it as much as you want, but you’re not allowed to start writing until we actually sit down together and start the first workshop,” says company cofounder and codirector Jan Zvaifler.

Scheduling the meetings can be a process in itself, because attendance is mandatory and most of the artists are working on other projects in the meantime.

“The larger the group, the more difficult it is,” Zvaifler says. “The basic premise is that if you want to be a collaborative partner, you have to attend every workshop. There’s no way of quantifying what the contribution’s going to be, so you just have to be there. So the first thing we try to do is set the schedule, and then the schedule always gets turned upside down.”

The workshop process proceeds over a minimum of three months, but preferably six to nine months, and then the artists fall back into the traditional roles of actor, director, designer et cetera as the show goes into rehearsal.

“When we make a play, since everybody’s in on it from the start, by the time we get into the first day of rehearsal the actors are fully up to speed with the idea of the play,” Graves notes. “The actors have a huge advantage. They become authorities on their roles before rehearsal even starts.”

Sometimes the topic is simply an issue the team is interested in exploring, but Central Works often likes to use a work

of literature as a jumping-off point.

“If they don’t have a preexisting story as a basis, a lot of writers like to let the story gradually evolve,” Graves says. “They write and see what emerges out of the writing, and then go further into that. It’s a very time-consuming process, and if our time frame is compressed it can put the pressure on in a way that’s a little bit uncomfortable. But if you come in with a story as a basis, if you’re either adapting it or you’re bouncing off of it, then a lot of that work is already done. Even if you don’t stick that closely to it, you still have some understanding of the story and you’re just shifting it and changing it. It makes it a little bit easier, so we encourage writers to do that.”

The Central Works Method has its roots in the Joint Stock Method, which Graves encountered as a UC Berkeley grad student working as a research assistant on Mark Wing-Davey’s 1992 production of Caryl Churchill’s *Mad Forest* at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Both Churchill and Wing-Davey were veterans of the London-based Joint Stock Theatre Group of the 1970s and ’80s, which used company workshops and research to generate material that was then used by the playwrights when they went off to write their plays.

“He recreated the Joint Stock development process for the production,” Graves recalls. “Listening to him describe it, and then beginning to read about the Joint Stock Method of play development, was really interesting to me. Central Works was

interested in developing new plays, and I said let’s try an

idea like that. We asked Samantha King to write the play *Roux* that we did here in ’97, and I directed it and Jan and Deb Fink were the actors in it. It was a big success for us and it was really exciting. We decided



**Gary Graves and Jan Zvaifler,  
Central Works co-directors.**

Photo: Tammy Berlin.



Richard Frederick and Michael Navarra in Central Works' *The Prince*.

Photo: Eduardo Solér

around then that that's what we wanted to do. Ours diverges dramatically from the Joint Stock Method, but that was our inspiration."

"We used it as a point of departure," Zvaifler adds.

There are some obvious pitfalls to a process in which the opening date is set long before a word of the play is written.



Jan Zvaifler and Richard Frederick in *The Window Age*, 2009.


Photo: Kate Kline

Graves ran across one of them while writing *Machiavelli's The Prince* to premiere late this August. The process had been cut down to three months, the bare minimum necessary if nothing goes wrong, so of course something went very wrong indeed.

"This year we expanded from three shows to four shows, and that had a major impact on our workload and stacked stuff up," Graves says. "So we got started way late, and then at the last minute the script just imploded. Two weeks before rehearsal started we read a big fat draft and said it looked good, a few little changes maybe, and these few little changes were like a strand unraveling a coat, and suddenly the whole thing just came apart. It was the week before rehearsal, and we had no script. It was terrifying. I met with the actors and brainstormed, closed down a number of options and came up with just one. I think it's the hardest writing experience I've ever had."

One obvious advantage of having a date set in advance is that it's the antithesis of the usual "development hell" that playwrights fall into, where a play bounces from reading to reading without ever coming to fruition in a full production.

"The playwrights love it, because there's not many places where when you set out on a commission, you've got an opening date," Graves says.

"That's definitely the big plus that we have to offer," Zvaifler agrees. "You're going to write a play, and we're going to produce it at this time. It's on the brochure." 

*Blastosphere!* runs through November 22 at the Berkeley City Club. Call (510) 558-1381, or visit [centralworks.org](http://centralworks.org).

**The Process** is a recurring series on different models of new play development around the Bay Area.