

## Theater

## IN CONVERSATION

# Brendan Connelly Clicks and Pops, Brendan Connelly with George Hunka

by George Hunka and Brendan Connelly

*Composer Brendan Connelly co-founded The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf with director Brooke O’Harra in 1998. In this question-and-answer session, Brendan speaks about the unique nature of his contribution to the troupe’s collaborative practice as he creates scores that both direct and accompany the creative work and performances of the group.*

*Brendan’s latest non-theatrical composition, a percussion piece entitled, They don’t care about the details but fuck with the structure and they’ll crush your spine, will premiere at the performance space The Stone on November 22 (details at <http://www.thestonenyc.com>). His work for Panic can currently be heard in the production of Rafael Spregelburd’s play running at Performance Space 122’s Buenos Aires in Translation festival. The group’s next production, Drum of the Waves of Horikawa, is scheduled to premiere at Providence, RI’s Perishable Theatre in April 2007, and will be performed in New York at HERE the following autumn.*

**George Hunka (Rail):** I might as well start out with the \$64,000 question. How do you define, as a composer, the role of sound and music in theatrical performance?

**Brendan Connelly (Connelly):** I’m always thinking about the various functions of sound and music in theater. There aren’t that many. Songs, descriptive or contextual sounds like doorbells, punctuations a la Richard Foreman, underscoring... and that’s about it, no? But then there’s opera, where music is tightly wound around the words, the narrative. It doesn’t have a separate identity.

**Rail:** And is the genre of opera where you begin?

**Connelly:** It’s the interdependency of word and sound/music and movement that seems to be the core of how Brooke and I make theater. I think that’s why we were drawn to Witkiewicz—seeing theater as the interaction of formal elements&mdash;and not one element subordinate to another. Our production of *The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (2004) was sparked by my “translation” of the Henry Fielding play into an imaginary early English, a landscape of phonetic clicks and pops, which was then ornamented with another layer of clicks and pops created with percussion instruments performed by non-speaking actors, and then another layer created by two electric guitarists.

This dense noise-fabric was kind of like a dare for Brooke. How can she “tell the story” with these tools?

**Rail:** Perhaps a less radical and more familiar genre to traditional theatergoers is the musical—periods of spoken dialogue, then characters bursting suddenly, and for no apparent reason, into song.

**Connelly:** Act three of *The Mother* (2002-2003) was conceived as a musical. The third act of this Witkiewicz play takes place in an imaginary realm where Leon, the son, encounters his parents when they were his age and about to give birth to him. The “musical” is only performed by the parents, these alien creatures. Leon quickly becomes frustrated, not only because he has been transported to this scary timewarp, but because everyone else sings to him.

**Rail:** Opera and musical comedy are forms we associate mostly with Western stages—opera with a European origin, musical comedy from Broadway—but more recently 2 Headed Calf’s shows have been integrating elements of Kabuki into these Western forms.

**Connelly:** *Major Barbara* (2005-2006) and the production we’re preparing now, *Drum of the Waves of Horikawa*, both come from our now-explicitly-acknowledged interest in Kabuki. The functions of music in those productions imitate and mimic the historical functions of music in Kabuki: the Naguata ensemble upstage, the Geza offstage, the moments of singy-speaking onstage. And also onstage is me as the tsuke player, dictating and ornamenting the performers’ actions and words.

With the two drummers of *Drum of the Waves* I’m trying to harness their punk drumming abilities. The score is a mix of my own strict notation and their own “patterns” and “beats.”

The plan that Brooke and I have for this play is that it’s performed in an ambiguous space that suggests a rock club more than a theater—no stage, a bar in the back, and bands between the “episodes” of the play. So I’m creating a score that uses elements from hardcore drumming, mixed with phrases from traditional Kabuki music and then mixed with my own compositional voice.

I’m still searching for the balance with this play.

**Rail:** Right now you’re only a few weeks away from the premiere of Rafael Spregelburd’s *Panic* for the *Buenos Aires in Translation* festival at P.S. 122. After the more radical work you’ve done with Shaw and *Drum of the Waves*, are you finding it challenging to work with more contemporary material?

**Connelly:** *Panic* is a tough one, mostly because, for all of its quirks, it’s a “play play.” That is, for the sake of the production, characters need to be understood in a very “straight” sense. You know, there’s dialogue like this:

“I’m going out to the store.” “Okay. Can you pick me up some milk?”  
“Sure!”

And then you assume that the character goes to the store or else you find out later why they never made it. And you believe that those two characters will always share that experience, of having discussed the idea of going to the store.

**Rail:** It's not quite the same thing as building a play from phonetic clicks and pops.

**Connelly:** No, it isn't. I'm struggling with what's interesting about having music in this play at all. It sometimes feels excessive in that the music doesn't help us learn more about the characters or the story, as it would in opera, or musical comedy, or Kabuki.

**Rail:** So how do you enter, as a composer, into a play like this?

**Connelly:** The one element that has become for me the conceptual jumping off point is that Rafael is toying with B-Horror movie conceits: scary wind, creaking doors, screams. And the play basically adds up to a string of red herrings, both plotwise and style-wise. It's ultimately not a scary play, like Anne Washburn's *Apparition*. So it's interesting to think how the music can play a similar game, constantly suggesting something is about to happen when nothing actually does.

It's also been interesting to think about what composers come up with to create this sense of impending doom. And how these gestures, like the violins in Bernard Herrmann's score for *Psycho* or the doublebasses in John Williams' score for *Jaws*, or even the celesta in Berg's *Wozzeck*, are perceived, almost immediately, as arrows pointing to the action.

**Rail:** It's a pretty traditional way of thinking about music in the theatre or film, as an underscore...

**Connelly:** It gets into that most horrible of locations that music is sequestered to in theater and film: supporting (I would say mindlessly supporting) the action on screen or on stage. "Mood music." Is it romantic? Then I will write "romantic" music. Is it scary? Then I will write "scary" music.

What's offensive about this particular relationship between music and narrative is that the composer often uses sounds or ideas that "represent" these moods and emotions. It's like shorthand. Minor chords mean "sad." Major chords mean "happy." The sound of swelling strings represents "yearning." Atonality produces an emotional association of "eerie and weird." Choral voices are "otherworldly and spooky." Blech! It always feels aggressive to me because it's making you feel one way or another, in lockstep with the story. Music should open up the ideas of the play, not mimic them. Anyway, I'm beating a dead horse, aren't I?

**Rail:** But if you're a composer working in what we can call "straight" theatre, to differentiate it from opera or musical comedy, you're considered a marginal part of the production, at least as most audiences think of it. It can easily be dismissed as incidental, can't it? It's even often called "incidental music."

**Connelly:** Well, that's what I'm constantly trying to deal with: how to write music that is exactly

what I would write for a concert that simultaneously “works” for the play. Sometimes we choose a project that has a built-in function for music and I can run with it (like the Kabuki stuff) and sometimes I bump up against that “incidental music” thing where you have to deal with very basic restrictions—like the music can’t be too loud when the actors speak and scene changes need to be “filled in”—I have trouble with those restrictions. Ask Brooke.

**Rail:** Along with Brooke and the performers you have an additional set of collaborators: you have fellow musicians, too, who are integral to your work.

**Connelly:** I get excited by working with musicians who are amazing note-readers and also great free improvisers. There aren’t too many of those, but almost all the musicians I work with have that background. Sam Hillmer [the Two-headed Calf’s sax player and music director], for instance, has played with an incredible variety of musicians—from Joe Manieri to Christian Wolff to The Dirty Projectors&mdashand he brings that experience to my scores. I often ask the musicians to navigate between normal notation and box sets, pitch sets, graphic notation, and sometimes just written instructions (for instance, “OPEN,” “frantic,” “ppp”—that’s a common one, you’ll hear it in the *Drum of the Waves*) and different chance operations.

In those chance-based scenarios the challenge is to keep the scene together but to encourage the actors to really *hear* what’s going on around them and interact with the sound and with each other. We did this in a scene in *The Mother* where the characters are all coked up. The musicians had sets of musical gestures but could play them at any time in any order. It was really exciting because every time was different. But that’s why theater is great. Because it always changes.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Hunka is a dramatist based in New York and the artistic director of the theater minima company.

Brendan Connelly is co-artistic director and composer of the Theatre of the Two-headed Calf.