

AT THE HAYWORTH

by **Julio Martinez**
photos: Chris Kane

OVER THE LAST 20-PLUS YEARS, theatrical entrepreneurs Jack and Jeannine Stehlin, Gary Blumsack and Donna Hyams have traveled active theatrical paths, launching their individual enterprises on myriad stages throughout the greater LA area. They now find themselves housed together in the historic Hayworth building on Wilshire Boulevard. The ornate two-story Spanish Revival stucco-over-brick structure was built in 1926, designed by noted architect Stiles O. Clements, who also created the Wilmet Theatre.

The complex is anchored on the first floor by the Hayworth Theatre (99-seats), which in bygone years housed the venerable Vagabond movie theatre (1930s-1993). The main floor also houses La Fonda Restaurant.

As Blumsack and Hyams prepared the second floor to house two studio theatre spaces (a 60 seat and a 50 seat), Stehlin and Stehlin were hard at work building a third space, named Circus Theatricals Studio Theatre at the Hayworth. “I know it’s a long title but it says everything,” says Jack Stehlin.

The Stehlin vision was realized this spring as Circus Theatricals inaugurated its new space with Colette Freedman’s adaptation of Euripides’ *Iphigenia*

at Aulis, directed by Jack Stehlin. Upcoming is the world premiere of John Bunzel’s *Complexity* (July 8-Sept. 6) performed in repertory with the LA premiere of *Greensward* by Seattle-based actor/playwright R. Hamilton Wright (July 15-Aug. 12).

“Of course, this is my dream come true,” affirms Stehlin who founded Circus Theatricals in New York in 1983. The company’s notable NYC productions included Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* Off-Broadway at the Classic Stage Company and *Danton’s Death* at the Rapp Arts Center.

“I came to Los Angeles in 1995 to try to be a working actor out here. The very first day I was here I met Gary Blumsack over at the Hudson Guild when a new play by John Bunzel [*Delirious*] was being read. I informed Gary I had a company concept and he invited me to make the Hudson Guild its home.

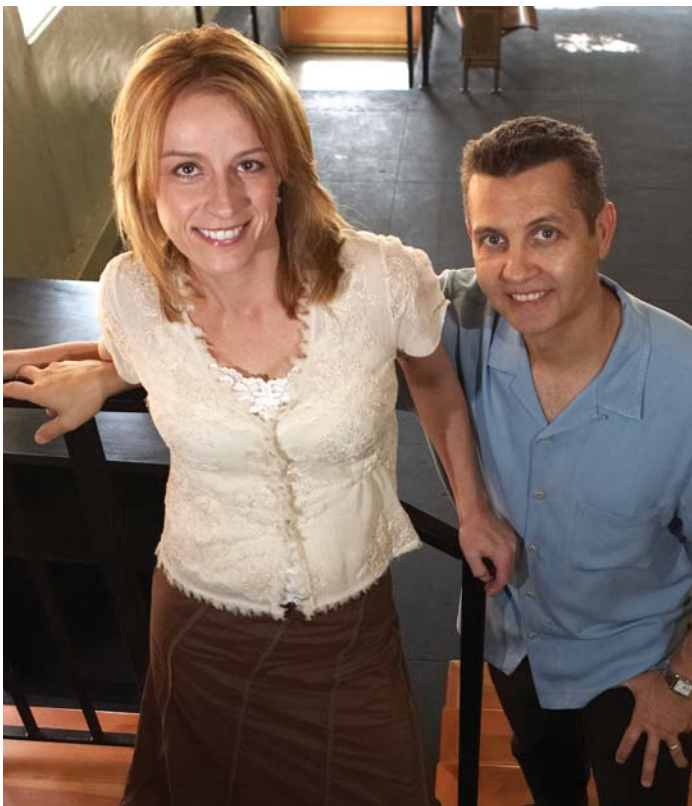
“I met an actress named Jeannine Wisnosky [now Stehlin] the very next day. She became first my partner and then my wife. We have been running Circus Theatricals for the last 10 years and have produced three little girls as well.”

Among the productions the company presented while in residence at the Hudson Guild (1995-1999) were Shem Bitterman’s *The Job* and Chekhov’s *Hedda Gabler*. Moving to a larger venue

at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble (1999-2004), Circus Theatricals staged such diverse fare as *True West*, *Tartuffe*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *The Cherry Orchard* (the latter two featured recurring company member Alfred Molina).

"The Odyssey was great to us," interjects Jeannine Stehlin, "but we became too complicated a group to merely be a guest in somebody else's theatrical structure. We needed a space 24/7 we could call our own. We have our producing entity and plan to do four main stage plays and four second stage works a year. We have our lab work. We also have a very active studio for actors. We train actors. Alfred Molina teaches a Shakespeare class. Jack teaches scene study. It was perfect timing for us

to re-unite with Gary, who is now our landlord, and build our own theatre within the Hayworth complex.



Jeannine and Jack Stehlin

Pacino in the LA production of *Salome* at the Wadsworth, so we opened the theatre with a Second Stage production, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, featuring the work of our Circus Theatricals Studio ensemble, which has about 50 members."

The Stehlins affirm the purpose of the Second Stage is to always accommodate the work of their resident ensemble, a company of actors that meets every Saturday. "We try to merge the idea of a membership company with a studio," he says. Circus Theatricals has a lab component for the development of new works that is not open to review. Colette Freedman's *Sister Cities*, directed by Elise Robertson, moved from the lab to a mainstage production, playing Sundays at 7 pm

through July 2. It features Jill Gascoine.

"Of course, we are chomping at the bit to stage *Complexity*," he says. This new work dissects a troubled marriage plagued by interfering machinations of a secretary, house painter, fashion designer and a single butterfly. Bunzel's previous works include the 1994 dark comedy *Gravity Shoes* (co-produced by Circus Theatricals and The Hudson Theatre) and in 1985 his groundbreaking play *Delirious*, (originally produced by Circus Theatricals at the William Redfield Theatre in New York). The cast includes Jack Stehlin, Neil Vipond, Shannon Holt, Jennifer de Castroverde and Nicholas Read, under the direction of award-winning Elina de Santos.

"We're also excited about its companion piece *Greensward*," she adds. "It's a wild comedy about a scientist who invents a grass that never needs watering, sending the political and corporate worlds into a panic. Richard Ziman, a Circus Theatricals founding member in New York, directs."

The title of "landlord" makes Gary Blumsack

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"Our inaugural production was supposed to be *Complexity*, which features Jack in the cast," she continues. "But he got the opportunity to perform with Al

smile. "My career in this town has been a series of creative but eventually untenable situations, each of which managed to move my life in a new location and a new direction."

Blumsack first trod the local boards as an actor and producer in 1985 as part of a company that converted the miniscule Burbank Little Theatre into the Burbank Theatre Guild. "I was very anxious to do original plays," he says. "We did some good work including the world premiere of *Names*."

He admits partnerships among creative people might result in cutting edge theatre but don't always make for great business relationships. "I wanted to treat the theatre as a place to play. I was like an unruly kid a lot of the time."

By 1990, the Burbank Theatre Guild had dissolved. During the ensuing years Blumsack joined forces with actress/producer Elizabeth Reilly (formerly of the Gnu Theatre) to create a multi-space theatre complex in an aged building at the corner of Hudson Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, owned by visionary Jerry Schneiderman. "Elizabeth is a masterful theatre



Donna Hyams and Gary Blumsack

manager and things went very well for a while," Blumsack recalls.

He is particularly proud of producing the multi award-winning hit musical, *Reefer Madness*. During that time he opened an adjunct space, The Lillian Theatre, within the Elephant Theatre complex, also located on Santa Monica Blvd., a few blocks east of the Hudson.

"Eventually, Elizabeth and I had creative differences and there were problems with other people at the Hudson, so I left. I was also going through a divorce at that time and I was pretty shattered." Taking up residence and refuge at The Lillian, Blumsack admits he felt beaten down and the last thing he wanted to do was run a theatre. That was in 2001.

Then a ray of sunshine came into his creative life in the form of actress-turned-producer Donna Hyams who had been running City Stage since the mid '80s. "Donna was producing a work at the Elephant and one day I heard her screaming outside the theatre," recalls Blumsack. "I thought someone was being murdered out on the sidewalk. I rushed out to discover that Donna was just having a discussion with a director. But I learned Donna only screams sometimes. Over the next few months, we had some great conversations and I discovered she had a wonderfully soothing effect on me. I really wanted to work with this woman."

The opportunity came when Schneiderman came back into Blumsack's life and offered him a new space (the Hayworth). "He told me he

"IT WORKS FOR ME BECAUSE I AM TOTALLY WORKING OFF MY OWN VISION."

—GARY BLUMSACK

wanted me to open it as a theatre and I immediately said, 'No!' I told him I'd open anything else, a fruit stand even, but not a new theatre."

Blumsack finally relented and put out the call for Hyams to join him in the venture. "That was 26 months ago," recalls Hyams. "I know exactly because I was in the hospital at the time. I told him I had just given birth to a baby but give me three weeks and I'd be there."

Hyams felt it was a perfectly natural decision. In the '80s, she had been part of a group of young actors who originally opened City Stage in the heart of the downtown slum area, at 4th Street and San Pedro. Over the years, she had single-mindedly kept the company going as it constantly shifted locales. "I did take a side job at New Line Cinema for awhile but eventually came back to theatre full time." In their decidedly loose corporate structure, Blumsack is Artistic Director and Hyams is Producing Director.

Under their banner, the inaugural production at the Hayworth was the critically acclaimed *Not a Genuine Black Man*. "Currently in production is a project by one of my former City Stage associates, actor/playwright Carlos Lacamara," says Hyams. "It is called *Nowhere on the Border* and deals with the current immigration situation. It is the second in a three-part trilogy that will conclude with *Havana Bourgeois*, which is scheduled for next February."

"We're also developing two new works," adds Blumsack, "*Lovelace: The Musical* and a stage version of the Hitchcock film, *Rear Window*. *Lovelace* is based on the life of porn star Linda Lovelace, and yes, there will be a number in it called 'Deep Throat.' We hope to get it staged by November or December. The adaptation of *Rear Window* is being written by Michael Sloan, directed by Bob Balaban and projected for early 2007."

Gary Blumsack knows operating a space with four stages is a potentially daunting task. "It works for me because I am totally working off my own vision. This is my last stop. I live and die right here. It is a great feeling." ■

NOWHERE ON THE BORDER

Continues Sat., 8 pm
Sun., 7 pm;
ends July 16
Tickets: \$20
The Hayworth
2509-11 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles
800.838.3006 or
www.brownpapertickets.com

COMPLEXITY

runs July 8-Sept. 6;

GREENSWARD

plays July 15-Aug. 12
Performing in repertory
Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 7 pm

SISTER CITIES

ends Sun., July 2
at 7 pm
Tickets: \$15-\$20

Circus Theatricals
Studio Theatre at
The Hayworth
Same address,
entrance on Carondelet.
323.960.1054 or
www.circustheatricals.com