

# ARTISTS TO WATCH

## Richard Alger and Tina Kronis

Richard Alger and Tina Kronis first met at a New York audition. As Kronis recalls, “We didn’t get that job but we got something better.”

Becoming a couple, they launched Theatre Movement Bazaar ([www.theatremovementbazaar.org](http://www.theatremovementbazaar.org)), which de-contextualizes movement, sound, text and design into something completely new.

After moving to LA in 1999, the duo has continually raised their game. At Sacred Fools, William Inge got the TMB treatment in *Cirque Picnique* (remounted at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in 2004) and Strindberg’s life and times



JAY MCADAMS

By David C. Nichols

Earlier this year, LA Stage Alliance conducted an informal survey of readers and contributors about must-see artists making a mark on the local theatre scene. The 12 who received the most comments are profiled here, and it’s a diverse and exciting group indeed.

deconstructed in *Strange Beliefs*. Boundaries blurred even further in *Dry Cleaning* and *Monster of Happiness* at the 24th Street Theatre.

Mummenschanz veteran Kronis smilingly explains, “For Richard, who’s a writer, with an engineering background, to be with a mime, well, we question each other a lot.”

Alger comments, “My parents met doing theatre. That’s one reason I initially couldn’t take it seriously.” They start with a concept—the Orpheus myth for *Dry Cleaning*, the pursuit of happiness for *Monster*. Alger notes, “In tandem with other performers and our incredible designers, including Jeff Webster and Ellen McCartney, the piece emerges. Our biggest rewards come from the process.”

## Mickey Birnbaum

“I think all of us try to work regionally as well as locally,” says playwright Mickey Birnbaum. “You have to be a gypsy. But, at some level, I’m happiest doing plays here. There’s such an extraordinary pool of talent.”

This has already been a banner year for Birnbaum. His play *Bleed Rail* premiered at The Theatre @ Boston Court while *Big Death & Little*

*Death* had its West Coast debut at the Road Theatre Company. “I’m a slow writer,” Birnbaum admits, “so imagine my reaction to having two plays, two very dark, difficult plays, running concurrently.”

He is deeply entrenched in writing two film projects. “They’re interesting poles of screenwriting. One is a studio comedy at Warner Bros., the other is an indie film directed by Steven Shainberg (*Secretary*). I’m in the middle of that process right now. It’s kind of a gratifying game.”

Birnbaum won’t abandon the theatre. “Thank goodness for the Dog Ear Collective” ([www.dogear.org](http://www.dogear.org)). He is working on one “set on the Arizona/Mexico border about backyard wrestling. It may end up being two plays yet.”



## Danny Calvert

Seldom has a performer descended on LA as felicitously as golden-throated Danny Calvert

([www.dannycalvert.com](http://www.dannycalvert.com)).

Recruited by Musical Theatre West for the regional premiere of *Altar Boyz*, which he had performed off-Broadway, the Missouri-born, Texas-raised Calvert says, “Where else would a company bring you out, house you in a two-bedroom condo and loan you a convertible to drive? I felt very LA very quickly.”

His show-stealing turn as closet Catholic Mark (on the recommendation of the role’s N.Y. originator Tyler Maynard) was followed by the title role in the West Coast premiere of *Zanna Don’t!* at West Coast Ensemble. A pastor’s son, Calvert began singing “in church, at age four, a duet with my mom.” During high school, he worked in dinner theatre, did Disney cruise shows and moved to New York in 2002.

After a non-Equity tour with *Rent*, along came *Altar Boyz* and now Calvert is “fully bi-coastal.” His first film, *P.S. I Love You*, written and directed by Richard LaGravenese, with Hillary Swank, Lisa Kudrow and Harry Connick, Jr., is awaiting release. “Just a scene where I’m teaching the game “Snaps” to Kathy Bates. But, hello? I’m living the life.”

## Ivy Chou

“I’ve always had a fascination with clothing,” says costume designer Ivy Chou. “In college, I was a history major and I’m intrigued by the “why” of what people wear.” Chou’s imposing resume includes *Pera Palas* at The Theatre @ Boston Court, for which Chou won an Ovation Award, and *Imelda* and *Master Class* at East West Players.

Of *Imelda*, Chou recalls, “It was crazy, huge, an original  
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RAY CHANG

musical, and many shoes. I researched the history of the woman behind Imelda Marcos, and the geopolitical aspects. There are so many different cultures within the Filipino culture." For *Master Class*, Chou "worked closely with actress Jeanne Sakata on her view of Callas, not just a recreation of previous versions. It was interesting to do it with an Asian cast. The hair was especially challenging."

Chou, who in August began a hiatus in Shanghai "for health reasons and to make contacts in the garment industry," prefers the theatre. Citing Boston Court, Lodestone Ensemble and Cornerstone as examples, she notes, "I'd love to do more with helping theatre companies from the ground up. That collaboration excites me."

LEE CHERRY



**Ameenah Kaplan**

"Sound and movement, that's the essence," says Ameenah Kaplan, recipient of Center Theatre Group's newly expanded Richard E. Sherwood

Award for early career artists. "Hybrid theatre. Storytelling based on spectacle," Kaplan says of her genre-defying style, which fuses percussion, movement and acting into an entirely original discipline, as in *Flight* and *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* at the Kirk Douglas.

"If you have a pulse, then you're a drummer," says Kaplan, who left NYU's Tisch School of the Arts her sophomore year to join the original American cast of *Stomp*. "Coming from a musical theatre/Stella Adler background, at NYU, I discovered Meisner, experimental theatre, a more visceral way to approach storytelling."

A self-taught drummer, Kaplan believes that "people are attracted to sweat. I like the audience to be close and to be involved. I use different kinds of performers, not to categorize." Kaplan is doing a master class of her *Everyman for Himself* through CTG, with whom the Sherwood Award signals an ongoing relationship. She notes that, "because of the proximity to Las Vegas, there's a surplus of physical performers in LA. This is a great place to develop shows."

**Maura Knowles**

Besides acting (many credits, including *Bulworth* and *Law & Order: SVU*), producing (*Blood Brothers* at Musical Theatre Guild, for starters), modeling (Nurigene's new skin care line) and cabaret (*Life's Little Ironies*), the ever-busy Maura Knowles is adding songwriter to her resume.



"I had been ruminating over an idea for a musical for about two years," says the Sacramento native ([www.mauramknowles.com](http://www.mauramknowles.com)). She mentioned it to director Che'Rae Adams, who brought Knowles into the LA Writer's Center. "She wouldn't take no for an answer. I showed up with a scene, and that was that. The Writer's Center is phenomenal."

Knowles and her composing partner, actor Will Collyer, were among 12 participants chosen for the Johnny Mercer Foundation's songwriting seminar at Northwestern University this August. "I resisted, he persisted. We met at FedEx the night before the deadline to send in the application. Literally, so last minute. Within two weeks, we got the call."

Knowles, who is also working on a memoir of "some crazy life experiences," finds LA an "ideal place to grow and stretch. It's such a cachet here of people who love theatre."



**E.M. Lewis**

"So far, I'm having a wonderful year," says playwright and poet E.M. Lewis. Besides having two one-acts included in

*The Car Plays* at the Steve Allen Theatre, Lewis (*Infinite Black Suitcase*) is taking on a hot-button topic in *Heads* at the Blank Theatre Company.

"I've never had such talkative characters," Oregon-born Lewis notes, and *Heads*, in which four civilian American and British hostages in Iraq share adjoining cells, has plenty to say. "It's a personal play, more than a political play," Lewis acknowledges. "I don't feel qualified to tell people anything politically. I want to tell stories."

By day a documentations specialist at USC, Lewis finds herself "predisposed to writing about people in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. I wrote *Heads*, which is my third full-length play, in 2005, when the subject of hostages in Iraq was very much in the news." Lewis is "so appreciative to Daniel Henning and the Blank and an absolutely wonderful cast. It seems typical of LA theatre. There's a sense of community here and room for whatever kind of theatre one might wish to see or to create."

**Jennifer Malenke**

Jennifer Malenke first arrived from New York a year ago. "I stayed with my friend Adam Wylie in Rancho Cucamonga. I'm now in North Hollywood and I love it. Yesterday I saw Ed Begley, Jr. getting his coffee at Starbucks."



Malenke "just thought I'd try the film/TV route. I now understand why so many wonderful Broadway stars are coming here. It's an amazing theatre climate." A Milliken-trained soprano who teaches voice and piano at the Burbank Music Academy, Malenke played the bride in Michael John LaChiusa's *Hotel C'est L'amour* at the Blank and high-flying Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance* at Musical Theatre West. "At the Blank, I felt so supported. Michael wanted to take it to Lincoln Center. *Pirates* was one of the best shows I've ever been in. Everyone was fantastic. The rehearsals were hilarious, a truly joyous experience."

Malenke also appeared in *Into the Woods* at the Ahmanson in 2001. "I covered several roles, including Rapunzel. In New York, one night, Laura Benanti's Cinderella was out. Her cover was sick. I went on with no notice and it just happened to be the night that James Lapine brought his family. That was definitely a career peak."

**Brian-Paul Mendoza**

In a decade, Brian-Paul Mendoza has gone from dance captain in the Broadway revival of *Grease* to

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Connie Danese

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acclaimed choreographer of such shows as *Raisin* and *Five Course Love* at International City Theatre and the multi-award-winning *Oliver!* at Deaf West. "An amazing experience," says Mendoza. "It took director Jeff Calhoun and me three weeks to let go of theatre notions. With sign language, obviously, communication is in the hand and, as a choreographer, I had to let go of everything I'd learned."

"I aim to be a director-choreographer," says the effervescent Mendoza ([www.bpmendoza.com](http://www.bpmendoza.com)). He recently was SSDC observer for *Sister Act* at Pasadena Playhouse, eventually becoming the associate director to Peter Schneider for its Alliance Rep run in Atlanta.

Mendoza moves back to New York in October, after choreographing Rupert Holmes' *Drood* with director Nick DeGruccio for Musical Theatre Guild, but he anticipates returning to LA. "I came out here because I couldn't get work, and now I'm returning to Manhattan to direct and choreograph. How ironic is that? But Hollywood is edging into the age of the movie musical again. I'll be back."

**Cricket S. Myers**

"Sound should be like another character," says sound designer Cricket S. Myers. "A good design can change a play's dynamic completely. It's not so much about deciding when a play needs sound as much as when it doesn't need sound. I start with the director, and where they think they're going to go. We rarely end up where I thought we'd be which I love, the sense of discovery, the collaborative energy."



An LADCC Award recipient for *Floyd Collins* at West Coast Ensemble, Myers is "booked solid through November." Her impressive resume cites venues that range from Son of Semele, the Colony and Furious Theater Company to all three Center Theatre Group stages, where she has regularly assisted designers including her mentor Jon Gottlieb, and created memorable sound plots for *Nightingale* with Lynn Redgrave and the revival of *Come Back, Little Sheba*.

Myers ([www.cricketsmyers.com](http://www.cricketsmyers.com)) has a massive collection of music and creatively obtained noises. "In one show, stuff was being thrown out of a window. I'm standing on my balcony and tossing things off, like, here comes a rocking chair! I'm sure passers-by found it, um, interesting."

**Jennifer Shelton**



Unaffected candor distinguishes the multi-talented Jennifer Shelton. "People haven't known what to do with me," she says. "I'm an African American who doesn't fit the gospel or R&B archetype. That traditionally means I play the boring ingénue, the tragic ingénue. But I'm actually more quirky and bizarre."

Versatility is Shelton's hallmark, whether in *The Hot Mikado* at MTW, *Man of La Mancha* at the Rubicon or *Five Course Love* at ICT, in which Shelton assayed five contrasting roles in 90 minutes. "Like being on a treadmill," she recalls. "Yet, with wonderful colleagues such as Christopher Carothers and Perry Lambert, it was the most fun, especially when the audience wanted to be a part of the party. I'm so grateful that director caryn desai thought of me for it."

Besides continuing her ongoing relationship with Musical Theatre Guild, where Shelton just finished a year on the executive committee, upcoming plans include "hopefully more non-singing roles. I've never considered myself a singer. Growing up, I played the piano. My family would pay me to stop singing." She laughs and adds, "Musical theatre is the hardest thing in the world. It can also, however, be incredibly rewarding." ■