

Palisadian Martha Demson Helms Ambitious Marathon Theater Event

By MATTHEW MEYER
Reporter

As artistic director of Open Fist Theatre Company, Palisadian Martha Demson has overseen some ambitious undertakings—but her latest venture may be one of the most challenging and unconventional yet.

Alongside accomplished director Guy Zimmerman and renowned playwright Murray Mednick, Demson's Open Fist ensemble is set to open a sprawling, marathon production called "The Gary Plays" on Thursday, May 4 at Atwater Village Theatre.

It's a compelling adaptation of six separate Mednick works that follow the series' titular character, unemployed Angeleno actor Gary Bean, in the years that follow his son's senseless murder.

Running through June 4, audiences can choose to follow Gary's journey over the course of three separate evenings (Thursday, Friday and Saturday, with two plays at a time) or in a single, six-play showing on Sundays.

Open Fist artists spent two years developing a version of Gary's odyssey (originally written as eight standalone plays) that could be told through the arch of a single production. Though the adaptation sometimes condenses the original subject



"The Gary Plays" at Atwater Village Theatre

Photo by Darrett Sande

matter and omits two of the plays in the original series, Demson said that the six-play production is extremely loyal to Mednick's original vision.

"This is a very pure, Mednick approach," she told the *Palisadian-Post*. "There's a style to it that becomes very fluid as you watch it, but it's very precise. It's very specifically his vision."

Demson said that Mednick's work is characterized by its exacting use of language—his scripts have a rhythmic quality and actors are meant to deliver the lines with a more presentational, forward-facing approach, almost as if they're speaking to the audience.

The process of adapting these plays without losing their unique qualities was guided carefully by the playwright's direct involvement, but also by the work of Zimmerman, who has directed standalone "Gary" plays in the past.

As he strung together the performances in a single chain for the first time, Zimmerman faced a familiar chronology in new light.

"We're looking at this meta-structure—not just at one play [from] beginning to end, and that arch, but six plays beginning to end, and that arch," Demson explained. "Where can we economize and where do we really want to emphasize something because it has a bigger

resonance in the greater context?"

Demson said it was largely her director who chose how to answer these tough questions. Her role, she said, was to make sure that whatever he envisioned became reality.

Most recently, that meant serving as a fresh set of eyes in the final stage of rehearsals, suggesting extra emphasis here, or paring down the focus on a particular element there.

Demson, who also serves as the production's producer, played a significant role in crafting the play's design elements as well. She described the show's set as a "shifting landscape," one that uses sculptural surfaces and projections to bring "fragments of the concrete system that is Los Angeles" to life. Some of the set pieces move on tracks, some are stationary, some are even meant to represent elements of Gary's psyche.

The end result, said Demson, is "this Los Angeles that is familiar, yet unfamiliar."

And to bring this LA story to life: a 16-person ensemble of diversely talented actors and actresses. Uniquely, three different members of the troupe will take on the role of Gary on different nights, bringing their own subtle nuances to the character.

While Gary might be the archetypical "main character," Demson

emphasized that "The Gary Plays" are a true ensemble work. "Not two leads and everybody else is a spear carrier," she told the *Post*. "But really a picture of a whole society on the stage."

In a late chapter of the odyssey, Gary even takes a backseat role in his own story, as he becomes more of a supporting character in another person's tale.

This all-hands-on-deck, give-and-take ensemble approach is nothing new for Open Fist—it's a defining quality that Demson said she's always loved.

Open Fist is a collective, self-producing company, she explained, with each of its artist members playing a role in every element of its operation: "The aesthetic of my company is 'we all do this together.' The idea is to incentivize collaboration in every way."

Demson has overseen that process since she joined the theater in its infancy, and has helped retain that collaborative quality even as it has grown significantly since she took the role of artistic director in 1997.

Despite her focus on the macro-level elements of Open Fist's operation, Demson said a work like "The Gary Plays" reminds her of why she fell in love with the company's work in the first place.

"I get completely swept up into it. It takes me on a journey," she told the *Post*. "My real hope is that we can create something so that that's everyone's experience ... It really gives you a sense of having gone somewhere."

"The Gary Plays" open on May 4 and play at the Atwater Village Theatre each Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday through June 4. For tickets and show times, visit openfist.org.



Martha Demson

Photo courtesy of Open Fist Theatre