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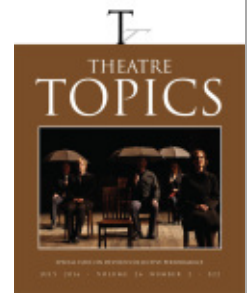
## The House Theatre of Chicago

Nathan Allen

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# The House Theatre of Chicago

*Nathan Allen*

*The House is Chicago's premier home for intimate, original works of epic story and stagecraft. Founded and led by artistic director Nathan Allen and driven by an interdisciplinary ensemble of Chicago's next generation of great storytellers, The House aims to become a laboratory and platform for the evolution of the American theatre as an inclusive and popular art form.*

*The House was founded in 2001 by a group of friends to explore connections between community and storytelling through a unique theatrical experience. Since becoming eligible in 2004, The House has been nominated for sixty Joseph Jefferson Awards (twenty-one wins), became the first recipient of Broadway in Chicago's Emerging Theater Award in 2007, and was awarded a 2014 National Theatre Company Grant by the American Theatre Wing, founder of the Tony Awards. Now in its fourteenth year of original work, The House continues its mission to unite Chicago in the spirit of community through amazing feats of storytelling. (See figure 1 and The House's website at <http://www.thehousetheatre.com/>.)*

## **On Self-Definition**

To *devise* seems like such an appropriate verb for the act of theatre-making. To sculpt something from nothing. To give form and function from the assembly of intangible assets. It feels related to *invention* and *machine*, other words I like. I like the word *devise* when used to describe the creative process. It's physical. It's intellectual. It's craft. Its cool. It gives a veneer of good practice to relatively disorganized processes of multidisciplinary collaboration. But I try hard not to use it as an adjective.

I am cautious not to label my work as something other than *theatre*. Probably out of fear that if I were to define my own work, and the work of other artists I admire, as anything other than *theatre*, I might rob something from my audience's expectations of the art form, and in doing so reinforce the local incumbency of psycho-realism as its dominant aesthetic standard.

I'm pretty curatorial about my team. I like belonging to an ensemble. At The House, we surrendered long ago to calling one another other "brother" and "sister." I prioritize working with people I know and love, and have for fifteen years. In that time, of course, that team has changed and evolved, but as a process of deepening our understanding of one another and our strengths and weaknesses. In this way it all happens naturally. The roles and responsibilities look like any set of production titles, but are really defined over time and experience—as a process of evolution and maturing. (See the A.V. Club's review of *The Last Defender* at <http://www.avclub.com/article/theater-ensemble-turns-mutually-assured-destructio-234449>.)

## **Impulse Origins**

It's hard to know where impulse truly begins, but I think I often start from an imagined image of a potentially dramatic moment, like a phrase of something that seems dramatic—a cheerleader flying over a cornfield, Houdini being pulled into the afterlife upside down and wrapped in chains,



FIG. 1. *Rose and the Rime* (2014). (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)

a baby being carried through woods in the cradle of a stag's antlers—some dramatic gesture by an inhabitant of some relatively unknown world.

I do know that I have to feed my own creativity with creativity—usually art in other mediums (games, books, movies, television, visual art) and sometimes other theatre. I have a better time of actually having ideas when I'm otherwise surrounded by cool stuff. (See figure 2 and the Chicago Stage Standard's review of *The Hammer Trinity* at <http://chicagostagestandard.com/highly-recommended-by-the-css-team/a-legend-is-reborn-the-hammer-trinity-house-theatre-of-chicago/>.)

## Developmental Processes

I can organize my process into six general phases, but the steps within each adjust from project to project. It is probably helpful to think of the phases as linear, although not necessarily with hard edges. The phases blend into one another and sometimes overlap rather than simply starting and stopping.

1. *Concept*: Making a practice of seeking inspiration; cultivating space-time for creativity.
2. *Development*: Outlining; writing; working a keyboard; reading; workshopping; working words through an actor's instrument or designer's instruments.
3. *Design*: Making a plan for each aspect of the project: script, casting, light plots, scenic and costume designs, and so on.
4. *Production*: Executing and refining the design plans through rehearsal and tech.



FIG. 2. *The Hammer Trinity* (2015). (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)



FIG. 3. *Death and Harry Houdini* (2012). (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)

5. *Performance*: Inviting an audience to the work.
6. *Evaluation*: Analyzing the audience experience and considering adjustments in the process and design.

(See figure 3 and the *Chicago Tribune's* review of *Death and Harry Houdini* at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-01-30/entertainment/ct-ent-0131-death-houdini-review-20120130\\_1\\_chinese-water-torture-cell-harry-houdini-chopin-theatre](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-01-30/entertainment/ct-ent-0131-death-houdini-review-20120130_1_chinese-water-torture-cell-harry-houdini-chopin-theatre).)

## **My Kind of Town**

Chicago has enabled my work by curating and nurturing an incredible cultural scene. First, and obviously, the cost of living remains reasonable for young artists relative to other cities of similar scale. But there is also healthy level of participation in the arts by a large enough population to support the experimentation of those developing artists. This spirit of support is finally encouraged by a unique culture of mentorship and collaboration among leaders of the city's legacy institutions.