



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

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### A theater of words (and design, too)

Tuesday, March 18, 2014

Dear ArtsWatch friends,

Yesterday **Sacha Reich** walked into a mid-afternoon meeting at a Southeast Portland warehouse district cafe, sat down, ordered a late lunch, and almost immediately started to rave about **Henk Pander**. That's not unusual. A lot of people rave about Pander, who at 75 is one of Oregon's most accomplished and widely known artists.

But Sacha wasn't raving about Henk the painter. She was raving about Henk the theater designer. There was a time, back in **Storefront**

**Theatre's** early days, when Pander's set designs were the talk of the town. Later, he designed for a few other companies, including the old **Tygres Heart Shakespeare Company**, and for some dance companies: Eugene audiences just saw his sets for a [revived production of Dennis Spaight's 1990 \*Scheherazade\* at Eugene Ballet](#). But it's been a while since Pander put his theater career on hold.

Now he's back at it, designing for the [Jewish Theatre Collaborative's](#) production of *A Pigeon and a Boy*, which Reich has adapted and is directing, and which opens Saturday on the stage of **Milagro Theatre**. It's clear Reich is pleased. "He's been able to flex his muscles," she said of Pander and his design, which must account for multiple time and space shifts. "He likes sets to be transformative, surprising. He created a piece of art, *and* it's responsive to the story."

The production, a world premiere, is the culmination of a months-long project that's cracked open the novel on which the play is based, by the Israeli author [Meir Shalev](#). Written in Hebrew and translated by **Evan Fallenberg**, the story centers on a middle-aged Israeli tour guide who delves into the secrets of his mother's life during Israel's war of independence (that's where the pigeon comes in) at the same time he's renovating a house and shaking up the patterns of his own life, which has begun to feel like a disappointment and a trap. Reich sums it up, or maybe just offers a starting point: "Life is a messy journey." Shalev's tale is "so saturated with human experience. It's life. The good, the bad, and the ugly." Stylistically, it "moves around a lot, and it's not told in a chronological way. It's set up, really, like a mystery." Pander's set finds ways to suggest that.

Storytelling is central to Jewish culture, which gives the theater collaborative rich source material. Since its

founding in 2008 the company's worked on projects originally written by authors ranging from **Sholom Aleichem** to **Grace Paley**. "It's a huge well for us to draw from," Reich said. "We can draw from across time and across the world. Because Jewish authors are everywhere."

Reich and the collaborative create plays in a process she calls Page2Stage, which transforms written stories onto the stage, using the language of the originals and often passing the narration from actor to actor, so quickly that the audience has to be as agile as the performers. She's learned a great deal from Seattle's [Book-It Repertory Theatre](#), which specializes in this sort of narrative theater. Creating *A Pigeon and a Boy* has meant paring down the novel at the same time the play is being built up. "We skeleton the entire novel," Reich said. In the process, a 300-plus page story has been slimmed down to about 19,000 words, allowing the essential passages to stand out: "The more space we put around the words, the more the story takes flight." That's meant pruning, pruning, pruning. When rehearsals began, the company was on Draft 8 of the script. Now, a few days before opening, it's on Draft 11. For Reich the director, also being the adapter is both an advantage and a complication. "I expected the writing role to go away," she said. "And they're still neck and neck."

What more can you tell me about Henk's set? I asked. Sacha paused, a little at a loss for words. How do you describe something essentially visual and kinetic? "I could give you a look," she said. "Or you could wait until Saturday night and be surprised."

I decided to wait. **Why spoil a good surprise?**

*Photo: Friderike Heuer*