

Profile's new leader values conversations with artists

By **MARTY HUGHLEY**
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For many people seeking to make their careers in theater, New York City is the ideal place to live and work. But Adriana Baer, who was working for a New York troupe called the Acting Company, happily relocated to Portland this summer.

"There was no problem convincing me to move to Portland," she says. "Being from San Francisco, I was looking for a way to get back to the West Coast — but I wanted to do that with a job."

The job that brought her back to her native time zone is the artistic director post at Profile Theatre, for which Baer beat out more than 60 applicants from places like New York, Atlanta, Rome and Prague. She started the job in July, taking over for Jane Unger, who founded Profile in 1997 and built it into one of Portland's most respected mid-size theater companies.

Unger's presence still will be felt: She chose Profile's 2012-13 slate of plays, all by South African writer Athol Fugard, and she's directing the production of "Master Harold ... and the Boys," which opens the season Saturday.

But the company's new era has arrived in the form of a personable and energetic 30-year-old with a master's degree in directing from Columbia University.

Columbia's theater program is known for having meager physical assets yet demanding a frenetic pace of production, Baer says. "The joke is that after you go there, you can produce any play with four clip lights and a bedsheet."

Baer grew up in Sonoma, Calif., about an hour's drive north of San Francisco, in an artistic family. Her father is a conductor, her mother an arts consultant, her sister a principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet. Baer was a child actor and dancer.

Her winding path to Portland included a job as an assistant to Libby Appel, Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director emeritus, on a 2009 production of "Paradise Lost." At the Shakespeare festival, she became friends with Lue Douthit, the director of literary development; it was Douthit who pointed her to the Profile opening when it was announced last year.

Baer's been busy learning the ropes in the Profile office and establishing connections with actors, directors and others in the Portland theater scene. But she took time out to discuss her background and her hopes for Profile's future.

The following Q&A has been edited for clarity and brevity.



Profile Theatre begins a new era this season under artistic director Adriana Baer, who recently succeeded company founder Jane Unger.

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"I want my audiences to be excited, inspired and curious"

— Adriana Baer

Q: When or why did you decide you wanted to be a director instead of an actor?

A: When I realized I was no longer reading plays from the point of view of the character I was going to play, but from the point of view of the storytelling, from a broader perspective. That was the middle of high school. Suddenly I wanted to talk not about the young ingenue but instead to ask: "What does this play look like? How does it function?"

Q: You sound like the sort who loves the thoughtful work of the rehearsal room. What made you want to take on all the other responsibilities of becoming an artistic director?

A: It's the biggest picture I can get on my field. I love directing, but I also love producing, supporting other artists' work and having conversations with artists. And I'm interested in arts advocacy. Being an artistic director allows me to do all that. I feel like I have a skill in talking to people in whatever language they speak — whatever theatrical language or design language. And this job gives me the opportunity to have all those conversations.

Q: In recalling her initial inspiration to start Profile, Unger said the concept excited her because she "could do Molière one year and Caryl Churchill the next." In 15 years, she didn't get around to either of those writers. What playwrights are on your list? Or, conversely, who do you think you don't need to include, who's already getting enough exposure?

A: What I think is so complicated about Profile is that there are so many writers to consider. I want my audiences to be excited, inspired and curious. I am really compelled by language, writers

who write with some kind of poetic text, a slightly heightened theatrical quality. If there's any single thing that will guide my choices, it will be that.

Q: For the company, this is a big move — Unger founded the company and ran it for 15 years. I'm sure no one's asking you for that kind of commitment, but do you see this as a long-term job?

A: I would like to be here for five years. That doesn't mean no more than five; it means be here at least five years. I don't consider this job a steppingstone to the next thing. At the same time, I believe the organization comes first. So if there's a time when something else is right for the company, I'll do something else.

Q: Unger and the Profile board made it clear they weren't looking to abandon the mission of the past 15 years — the season-long focus on a single playwright each year. But within that framework, do you have a sense of whether the board chose you to be a steward or to be an innovator?

A: I think truthfully that it's both. Profile's mission is unique. Even Signature Theatre in New York, which was sort of Jane's model early on, no longer does exactly what Profile does. They're so much larger now that they're doing a lot more, different things. The board made an active decision to keep the company going and to keep its mission intact. There's a real interest in how to keep that identity and to keep it really relevant to the community. It's important to everybody that that model stay true. But that said, there's freedom in how we carry that out.

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