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BRIDGE 20TH SEASON OPENER

Theater Review: 'Hearts Like Fists' Beats Fast, Funny and Affecting For Actors Bridge 20th Season Opener

SEPTEMBER 12, 2015 BY [EVANS DONNELL](#)



Playwright [Adam Szymkowicz](#) knows how to write dynamic scenes that engage deep-rooted

emotions while simultaneously tickling the funny bone. Enjoyable proof of his superhuman writing skill is on high-octane display at **Belmont University's Black Box Theatre** as **Actors Bridge Ensemble** unleashes its twentieth anniversary season with the superhero satire "**Hearts Like Fists**."

Our heroes are three women – Nina (**Cassie Hamilton**), Jazmin (**Brooke Gronemeyer**) and Sally (**LaTorius Givens**) – who are nurses by day working with a, um, heartsick fellow sister of mercy (**Kara McClelland**) and Peter (**Jess Darnell**), a brilliant, well, heartthrob doctor who's trying to perfect an artificial heart to save the world from, sigh, heartbreak. But at night they become masked avengers seeking to quell crime in the big city – and they've just about done that, except for the extinguisher of love's flame known as Dr. X (**Jack E. Chambers**).



Only the looks-that-stop-traffic feisty femme known as Lisa (**Britt Byrd**) has encountered the evil MD and lived to tell about it – will she join our tenacious trio in their pursuit of justice or risk possibly greater peril by trying to forge a lasting relationship with Peter? Happily in this fast-paced 100-minute one-act you don't have to tune in tomorrow to find out.

This over-the-top theatrical comic book (aided greatly by **David Ian Lee** and **Carrie Brewer's** crisp fight choreography, **Christen Heilman's** colorful costume design for the superheroes and **Eli Van Sickel's** inspired sound design – you'll never think of such tunes as "Love Theme [From

"Chinatown"], "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing" and "All By Myself" in the same way again after their hilarious use in this show's soundtrack) provides enough laughs to make even a supervillain guffaw. But in examining the damage of failed love from the opening scene as well as underscoring the courage it takes to risk loving others there's a solid center below this play's candy shell.



The entire cast (including strong support from **Austin Olive**, **Parker Arnold** and **Haley Rose Maurer**) plays Szymkowicz's deft blend of smart and silly beautifully. Chambers is best when he's given a role he can take to the wall (and through it), so his Dr. X from start to finish is a fiendish – though of course somewhat sympathetically tortured – delight. Hamilton, Givens, Gronemeyer and McClelland get the quirks in their respective characters across in very humorous fashion, though they too have more to offer than that. And Byrd and Darnell absolutely nail the young-conflicted-lovers motif.

Richard K. Davis' lighting design provides perfect framing (and there are two actual frames which I bet master carpenter **Tony Nappo** had a hand in constructing that create the look of comic book panels as well). Lee – **who is presently appearing in Nashville Repertory Theatre's production of "Rapture, Blister, Burn"** – and co-director **Jessika Malone** (the Actors Bridge artistic associate) have assembled actors and artisans and given them full license to turn Nashville's best black box into an urban jungle with a minimum of fuss and a

maximum of fun.

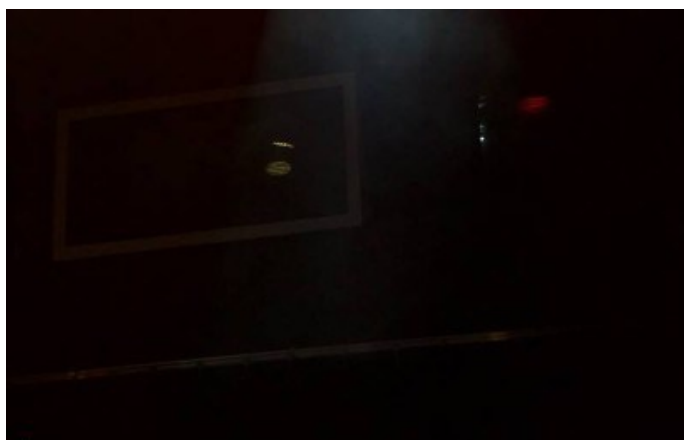


"Hearts Like Fists" is a blast of entertaining brio that signals the marks 20 years of presenting take-no-prisoners and bore-no-audiences theater for Actors Bridge Ensemble. Producing Artistic Director **Vali Forrister** and colleagues are still finding fresh ways to tell wonderful stories – bravo!

*Actors Bridge Ensemble's production Adam Szymkowicz's "Hearts Like Fists" co-directed by Jessika Malone and David Ian Lee continues through **Sept. 20** at Belmont's Black Box Theatre (**1575 Compton Ave.**). Shows start at **7:30 p.m.** on **Thursdays, Fridays** and **Saturdays** with **Sunday** matinees at **4 p.m.** Tickets can be purchased in advance online for **\$20** by clicking **here** or for **\$25** at the door. This play contains mature subject matter and situations; it is not intended for young audiences.*





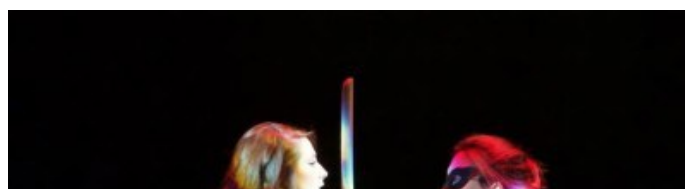


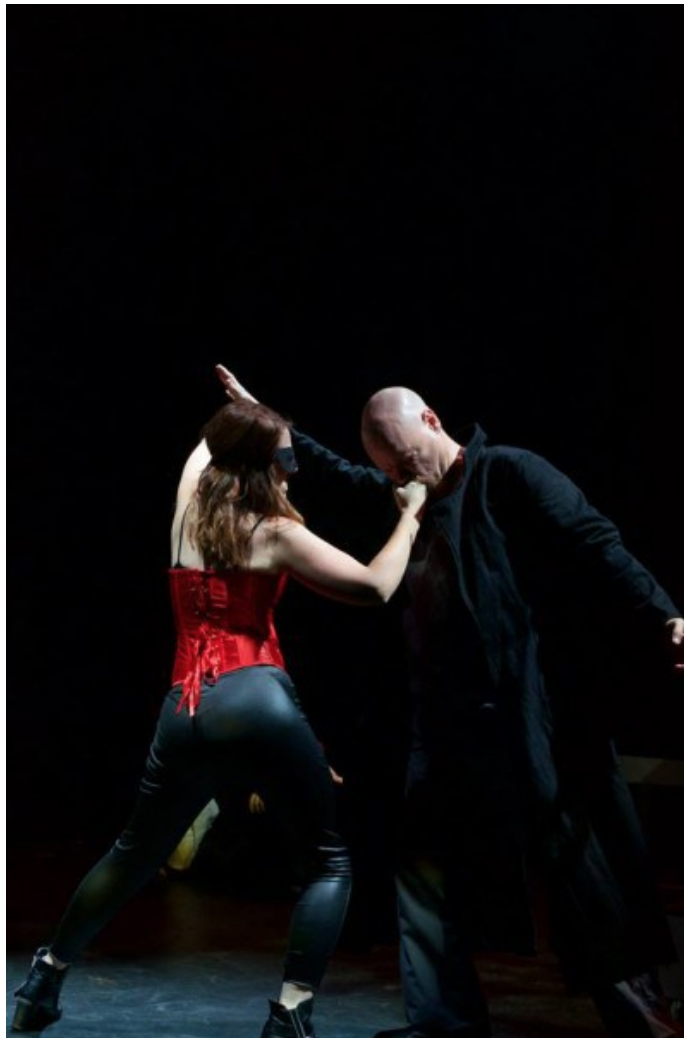












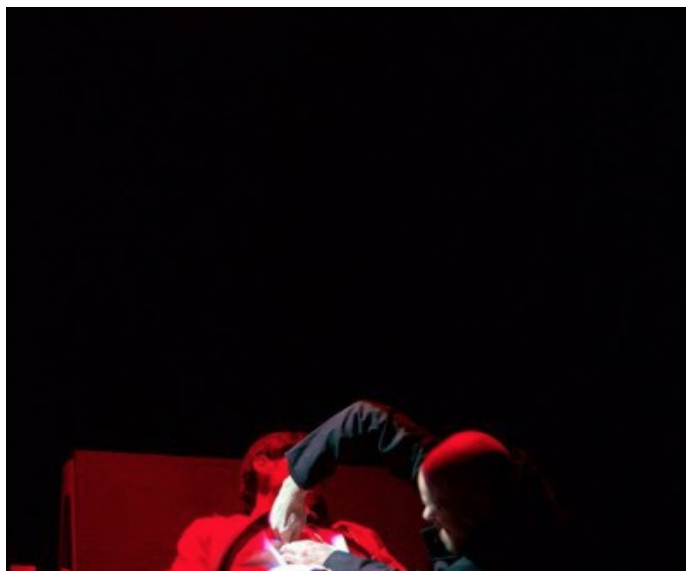














*Photos by **Richard K. Davis** of **Ardee Design Group, LLC** courtesy **Actors Bridge Ensemble**.

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About Evans Donnell

Evans Donnell wrote reviews and features about theater, opera and classical music for *The Tennessean* from 2002 to 2011. He was the theater, film and opera critic for ArtNowNashville.com from 2011 to 2012 and for ArtsNash from 2012 forward. Donnell has also contributed to *The Sondheim Review*, *Back Stage*, *The City Paper* (Nashville), the *Nashville Banner*, *The* (Bowling Green, Ky.) *Daily News* and several other publications since beginning his professional journalism career in 1985 with *The Lebanon* (Tenn.) *Democrat*. He was selected as a fellow for the 2004 National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and for National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) arts journalism institutes for theater and musical theater at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism in 2006 and classical music and opera at the Columbia University School of Journalism in 2009. He has also been an actor (member of Actors Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA), founding and running AthensSouth Theatre from 1996 to 2001 and appearing in Milos Forman's "The People vs Larry Flynt" among other credits. Donnell is a member of the [American Theatre Critics Association](#).

Trackbacks

Lauren Gunderson's Comedy 'The Taming' Opens Tennessee Women's Theater Project 2015-16 Season – Nashville Arts Critic says:

September 20, 2015 at 6:17 AM

[...] Colette Divine plays Patricia, ruthlessly practical legislative aide to a conservative U.S. Senator. Colette played many characters in the world premiere of TWTP's "Voices of Nashville" at the Looby Theater and on tour as well as in the 2015 revival. The others in the cast are new to the company: Cate Jo plays Bianca, a scandal-mongering liberal blogger whose favorite endangered species is threatened by the Senator's latest bill; she appeared in the recent Vanderbilt University Theatre production of "Top Girls." Brooke Gronemeyer plays Katherine, the reigning Miss Georgia, who's hell-bent to be crowned Miss America – and to change the course of the nation; Brooke's latest stage appearance is with Actors Bridge Ensemble in "Hearts Like Fists." [...]

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