

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

2016-17 SEASON

PLAYGUIDE

JANUARY 4 - JANUARY 29

THE MAKING OF A GREAT MOMENT

PETER SINN NACHTRIEB:

The playwright on long-distance cycling, touring theatre, and Canadians.

THE GREAT MOMENTS:

Four inventions that changed civilization. (Or at least the dairy industry.)

DROPPING KNOWLEDGE:

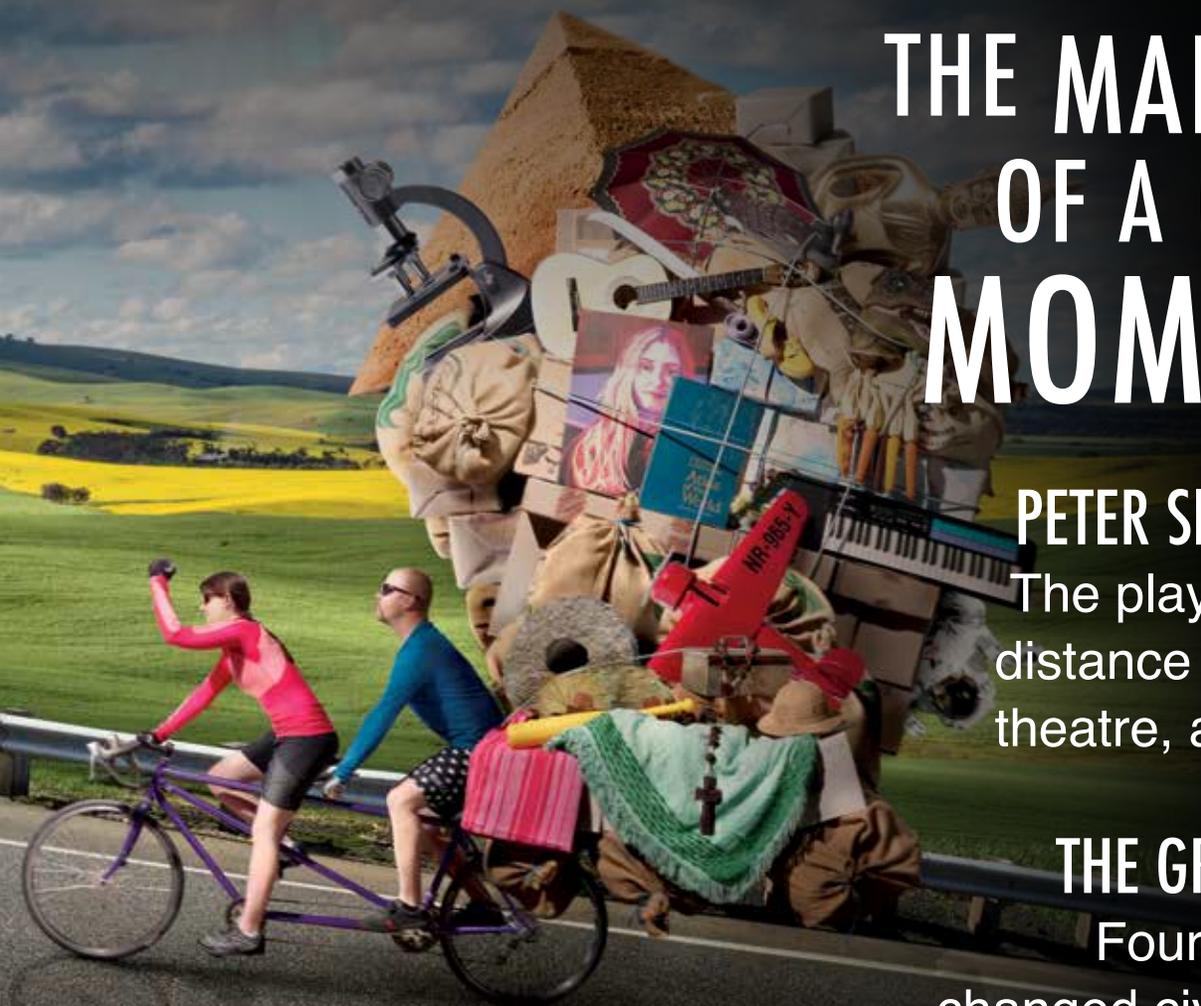
Great Moment's ingenious set design

WRITTEN BY

Peter Sinn Nachtrieb

DIRECTED BY

Sean Daniels



SEAN DANIELS
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



ELIZABETH KEGLEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PRESENTS

THE MAKING OF A GREAT MOMENT

WRITTEN BY

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JANUARY 4 – JANUARY 29, 2017

The Making of a Great Moment is produced by special arrangement with Mark Orsini, BRET ADAMS, LTD., 448 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036. www.bretadamsltd.net

The Making of a Great Moment was developed with the support of NYU/Abu Dhabi and Z Space, San Francisco



FARLEY | WHITE
INTERESTS

PRODUCTION SPONSOR



Merrimack Repertory Theatre is funded in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.



Merrimack Repertory Theatre operates under agreements between the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), Actors' Equity Association (AEA), Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC), and United Scenic Artists Local (USA) USA-829, IATSE.

† Member MRT Patriot Program.

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PLAYGUIDE

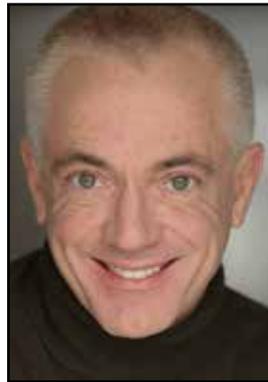
The Cast of THE MAKING OF A GREAT MOMENT



AYSAN CELIK
(Mona Barnes)

MRT: Debut. **Off-Broadway:** *Paris Commune* (Bam/The Civilians/BAM/The Public), *Juárez: A Documentary Mythology* (Theater Mitu/Rattles-tick), *The Black Eyed* (New York Theater Workshop), *Attempts On Her Life* (SoHo Rep), *Faust* (Target Margin/Classic Stage Company), *Pericles* (Red Bull/

Culture Project). **Regional:** *Bob: A Life in Five Acts* (Humana Festival), *9 Parts of Desire* (Actors Theatre of Louisville), *Antigone* (American Repertory Theater), *Paris Commune* (Civilians/ArtsEmerson/La Jolla Playhouse), co-creator/Hamlet in *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* (Mitu/NYUAD Arts Center), co-creator/original performer of Mitu's *Juárez: A Documentary Mythology* (currently continuing its US & international tour). **Education:** Graduate of ART Institute at Harvard, founding Associate Artist of Theater Mitu, Associate Artist of The Civilians, and Assistant Arts Professor at New York University Abu Dhabi.



DANNY SCHEIE
(Terry Dean)

MRT: Debut. **Theatre:** Previously collaborated with actress Aysan Celik, playwright Peter Nachtrieb, and director Sean Daniels on the world premiere of *BOB* at Actors Theatre of Louisville. He most recently played Weston Ludlow Londonderry

in Nachtrieb's *House Tour* at Z Space in San Francisco. Daniels directed him in several productions at California Shakespeare Theater, where he is an Associate Artist. Other theatres include Trinity Rep, Berkeley Rep, Yale Rep, Arena Stage, South Coast Rep, Folger Theater, Asolo Rep, Old Globe, Pasadena Playhouse, A Noise Within, Seattle Shakespeare, Theater Rhinoceros, Magic Theater, Aurora Theater, San Jose Rep and Shakespeare Santa Cruz where he also served as Artistic Director from 1992-95. **Education:** BA from IU; PhD from Cal Berkeley; Professorship at UC Santa Cruz.



Peter Nachtrieb, playwright, towers over Sean Daniels, Aysan Celik, and Danny Scheie.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Here's what I love about Peter Nachtrieb.

He's hilarious.

He's sentimental about life.

He's tall.

He's subversive.

He is unsentimental about his own work.

He knows a groan is as good as a laugh.

He will rewrite a joke over and over again until he gets it just right.

He's a good guy.

He's thinks about honor, fairness and how we as an arts community can be better to each other.

He thinks about how he can better take care of his people.

He's filthy.

No one writes funnier plays.

He's even taller than you remember.

Every play of his tries to tackle a HUGE unanswerable question. Just as the Germans have words that try to encapsulate large unwieldy feelings (Weltschmerz – depression caused by the weight of the world, Torschlusspanik – the fear that as we get older time and opportunities are slipping away, and my favorite: Backpfeifengesicht – a face that cries out for a fist to hit it), Peter, our German playwright, does the same with his plays.

He writes plays that ask questions that are so large, the answer seems impossible to ever get at in 2 hours! (What is greatness? How do we do something worthy of being remembered? Is all this suffering worth it in service of making tens of people laugh? What will time remember of us as a species?) And yet, because he's so skilled at jokes, at capturing the daily banter of life, at creating charming characters, you only later realize you've watched a large existential conversation.

How do we struggle with the choices we've made in the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), in the face of all we know today (Allgemeinbildung), and yet always move forward so we can show empathy towards our fellow human (Fingerspitzengefühl)?

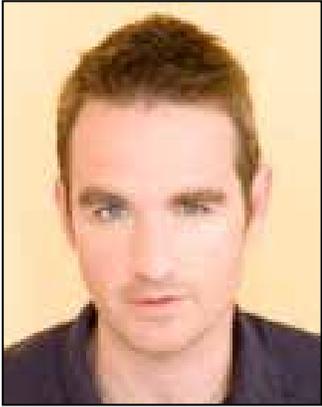
How do we answer that and have a good time in 90 minutes? (Nachtrieb).

I can't wait to share this with all of you.

—*Sean Daniels, Director*

Also, P.S. there was no room in this article for this, but the word for Grief Bacon is Kummerspeck and I just wanted to make sure I got that in here.

Q&A: PLAYWRIGHT PETER SINN NACHTRIEB



Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, Playwright

Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, 6'6", is San Francisco-based playwright whose other works include *The Totalitarians*, *boom*, *BOB*, *Hunter Gatherers*, and *A House Tour of the Infamous Porter Family Mansion* with Weston Ludlow Londonderry.

was my first time doing any sort of distance cycling.

So the training, the experiences of the road, and the general pain of riding long distance—the real physical toll it takes to sit on a bicycle that long—got folded into it.

There's also a whole bicycling scene in the script – one thing I found was that it's pretty hard to have a conversation on a bike, because usually you're riding single file. But there is a system of warning someone behind you or in front of you about potential obstacles; a car, glass, nails, small child.

Where did this play originate?

Well, it started with Aysan – she and Danny were in a play that I wrote that Sean directed back in 2011, and we had an amazing, really great time working on it.

Fast forward to when Aysan got her job at NYU Abu Dhabi. She had some research funds, and wanted to do a project that would revolve around comedy, where the three of us could work on something together that would exploit the brilliant, natural comedic chemistry that I believe the two actors have.

How did you get the idea for actors on bicycles?

There's actually a theatre troupe from the Bay Area that tours across the country on bicycle. And I was also training for a long distance bike ride at the time. The idea of actors on bikes let me explore ideas about the sacrifices and the adversity some artists are willing to endure in order to do something that they really are passionate about and care about.

Did experiences from your own long-distance riding make it into the script?

The ride I trained for was the AIDS/LifeCycle, it's an annual charity ride from San Francisco to LA, about 2,300 cyclists traveling 550 miles over seven days. It

Are there core questions this play is asking?

I think it's asking the question of why we choose to pursue whatever it is we're pursuing – and what do we think our chosen vocations do for ourselves or for humanity.

The two characters, Mona and Terry, have differing points of view about why they do what they do, and the tension of the play has blossomed from there. I wanted to put Mona and Terry's personal story – and the physical and emotional toll of biking and camping

and hauling sets and performing for crowds that vary in size and alertness—into relief with the great moments of human achievement that they're acting out within the play itself.

How did you come up with the "Great Moments" that Mona and Terry perform in their show?

I initially approached it by just asking a lot of people: What do you think are the great moments of human achievement? And when we talk about a great moment in human achievement, what does that even mean?

I also read a bunch of books, including one called *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari. It starts when humans became a species, and goes all the way to now, and discusses the revolutionary moments where humans became distinct from

"The idea of actors on bikes let me explore ideas about the sacrifices and the adversity some artists are willing to endure in order to do something that they really are passionate about and care about."

other species and a dominant force on the planet.

Was it tough to narrow it down?

Baron Karl von Drais, who invented the bicycle, had to be in there. If they're bicycling in the play, the bicycle's got to make it in thematically too, and the bike becomes a metaphor for a whole bunch of other things in the show.

Some others are ones that I think are funny, or that use characters who aren't locked into exact history so I can create mythical non-historically accurate figures that give Danny and Aysan some real comedic freedom.

The inventor of cheese, for example—it's based on some legends about how cheese was invented/discovered, but put into a character. The first time we read it, Aysan threw in this ridiculous accent—and it's really stayed in the play mostly because of the accent.

“The first time we read it, Aysan threw in this ridiculous accent—and it's really stayed in the play mostly because of the accent.”

You've worked for traveling theatre before – any high or low points?

I've worked as an actor for an interactive murder mystery company called Murder on the Menu for about 15 years, and also worked for a theatre company that does corporate trainings, including sexual harassment trainings.

A lot of the time you'd come to the place you're supposed to perform, and the odds are just stacked way against you: you're performing in a wine cave, or you don't have a good microphone and you're performing for 500 people and they're drunk.

So I think that sense of dread you can have as a traveling performer, even before you get there, is embodied in *The Making of a Great Moment*: anything can happen. There's some pride swallowing that happens. You have to just move forward and do the best work that you can.

Any reason the characters are Canadian?

I liked them not being American. I have another play about American mythology – the “Great Man” stories of America, and I wanted this one to not be so tied to us as a country. To have them be just slightly outsiders to the US seemed fun to me. People might not have pre-judgments about who they are and where they stand

Why do you write for the stage?

I was always in love with theatre and performing, before I considered myself a writer. I loved standup and sketch comedy, and those were my first writing experiences for the stage.

Eventually playwriting became the thing that engrossed me the most. I love writing for a live performance— that elastic relationship you can have when you're in the moment with someone in the room, that every show can be different, that every audience can be different, and that you can adapt and respond to that.

It feels more and more important to me as there are more and more technological ways to enjoy great art; I feel even more committed to the live experience as something that's special.

Learn More about Peter: www.peternachtrieb.com



Danny Scheie and Aysan Celik. Photo by Meghan Moore

THE GREAT MOMENTS (Or four of them, anyway)



Copper

METALLURGY

Humans have been manipulating metals (**METALLURGY**) for an extraordinarily long time. The oldest man-molded metal? **Gold, which has been found in caves used during the late Paleolithic period – 42,000 years ago.**

It's malleable, it's shiny, and it shows up in nature in pure form. All of that made it a cherished possession of some prehistoric humans—despite its lack of practical uses.

As far as useful metals go, it was copper that revolutionized the world, its use for tools and weapons facilitating a major leap in human technology around 5,000 BCE. When alloyed with zinc, it creates even more resilient bronze, which blasted many civilizations into periods of **enormous growth and urbanization.**



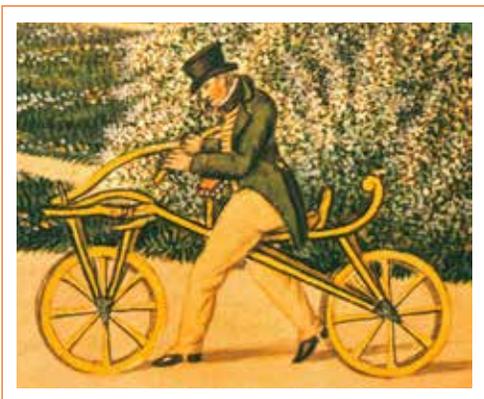
Wheel

WHEEL

You might think the **WHEEL** is almost as old as humanity itself, but it's actually only been around since about 3500 BCE.

The tricky thing about inventing the wheel was not making a round object roll on the ground; that part's easy. The hard part was **figuring out how to attach a platform** to that round object with an axle. Both the axle and the inside of the wheel had to be almost perfectly round and smooth to get the friction low enough.

Whoever invented it probably had access to thick-trunked trees from which to carve large, round wheels (not to mention metal tools to chisel holes and axels). We don't know exactly where the first wheel came from, but many archeologists suspect modern-day Poland or Ukraine, where archeologists have found miniature models of wagons, that may have been children's toys—or prototypes for life-size ones.



The Draisienne bicycle

BICYCLE

The **BICYCLE** came from the mind of German inventor Baron Karl von Drais, but his contraption looked quite different from today's bikes.

The most significant difference? **No pedals!**

Called a Draisienne, or "Running Machine," its frame supported a rider who propelled himself by walking.

Pedals appeared over forty years later, in a wood-framed, metal-tired contraption affectionately called the "Boneshaker," and inflatable tires more than twenty years after that.

Sometimes the road to progress is a bumpy one.



Cheese

CHEESE

Humans have been making **CHEESE** for 4,000 years – but no one knows where it started.

An ancient legend tells of a merchant who carried his supply of milk in a pouch made from a sheep’s stomach, where the rennet from the pouch lining in the heat of the sun caused the milk to curdle. Scholars believe that Asian travelers brought cheese to the Roman Empire; the Romans brought it to England, and it was perfected in the monasteries of Europe by monks through the Middle Ages.

Cheese came to the Americas in the 1600s on the Mayflower, and moved west in the 1800s to agricultural havens like Wisconsin, where residents’ livelihood were intertwined with the factories that led the way for mass industrial cheese production. Cheese is projected to become a **\$100 billion global** industry within two years.

CHEESE FACTS:

- Today, **France consumes the most cheese per capita** – the average French person eats 59 pounds each year. (The average American only eats about 35 pounds.)
- There are about 2,000 varieties of cheese in the world, from animals including **water buffalo, reindeer, camels, and moose.**
- The world’s oldest cheese was found in a Chinese desert with a mummified body **dating back to 1615 BCE**, preserved by the dry air and salty soil.
- Today, more than **1/3 of all the milk** produced in America is used to make cheese



The Boneshaker bicycle

Sources:

World Gold Council, gold.org

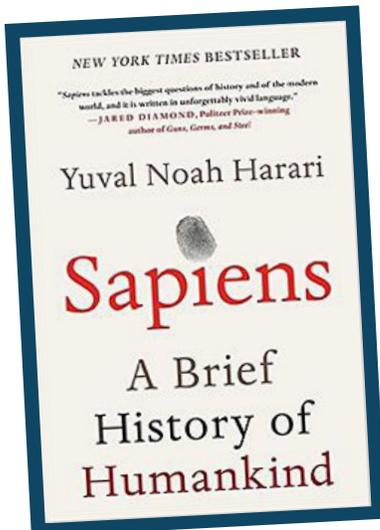
Science Kids, sciencekids.co.nz

“Why it Took So Long to Invent the Wheel,”

www.livescience.com

International Dairy Foods Association, idfa.org

SAPIENS



Sapiens, the book that inspired Mona and Terry's "Great Moments".

Playwright Peter Sinn Nachtrieb used Yuval Noah Harari's book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* as the starting point for the "Great Moments" Mona and Terry perform. **The book looks at the revolutions that turned Homo sapiens, an unremarkable primate, into the dominant species on earth**, edging out the competition, forming far-reaching social networks, and radically altering the natural landscape, and even other species, to their advantage.



Neanderthal brains were larger than ours.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW KEY CONCEPTS:

- **WE WON THE EVOLUTION GAME BECAUSE OF A UNIQUE SOCIAL ADVANTAGE.** You might be surprised to know that our evolutionary cousins, Neanderthals, had a higher brain-to-body mass ratio than we do. One theory suggests that *H. sapiens* got the evolutionary advantage through the ability to create social hierarchies and talk about the competition—to lie, cheat, or conspire against Neanderthals (and each other).
- **WE CAN ONLY LIVE IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE BECAUSE OF COLLECTIVE FICTIONS.** Harari calls these "inter-subjective beliefs": the idea that money is actually worth something, for example. Or that a certain set of laws is worth following, or that our fellow humans have certain rights, or that a certain religion is legitimate. Large-scale, collective buy-in to those ideas allows **total strangers to cooperate and live in peace.**



Empires such as Rome shaped much of human history.

- **EMPIRES SHAPED A TON OF HUMAN HISTORY.** They've legitimized rule over **many cultural groups in large geographic areas.** Sure, certain empires have been responsible for global suffering and the loss of entire cultures. But we will never know whether a world without them would have been a more or less peaceful one.

- **THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION HAPPENED WHEN PEOPLE USED MATH TO CONFRONT IGNORANCE.** Before the scientific revolution, **the unknown was considered unimportant,** because it had no apparent relevance to daily life. Modern science emerged when people started using calculations and logic to build on the knowledge gained by their own previous observations, and by the scientists before them.

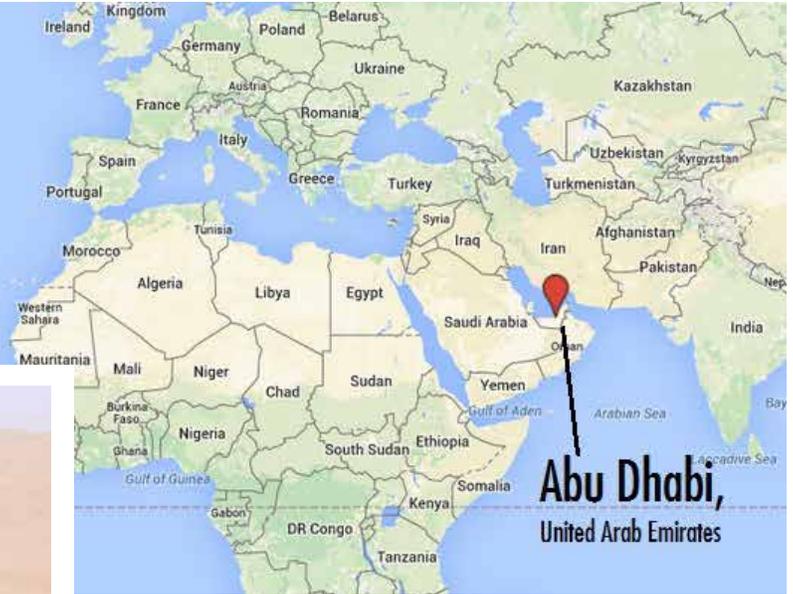
- **WE ARE QUICKLY APPROACHING THE ABILITY TO AUGMENT OURSELVES WITH TECHNOLOGY, CREATE INORGANIC LIFE, AND POSSIBLY ACHIEVE A-MORTALITY.** In evolutionary terms, science now adapts and responds to environmental changes much more rapidly than our biology. **Technological evolution has taken the place of biological evolution** for *H. Sapiens*, and some scholars believe that the first person to live to be 1,000 has already been born.



Most of us now carry computers in our pockets more powerful than those used to send humans to the moon.

ARTISTS IN THE DESERT

Director Sean Daniels, Playwright Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, and Actors Danny Scheie and Aysan Celik spent ten days in a workshop at NYU Abu Dhabi, making *The Making of a Great Moment*—and having some great moments of their own.



Celik, Scheie, Daniels, and Nachtrieb in the desert.

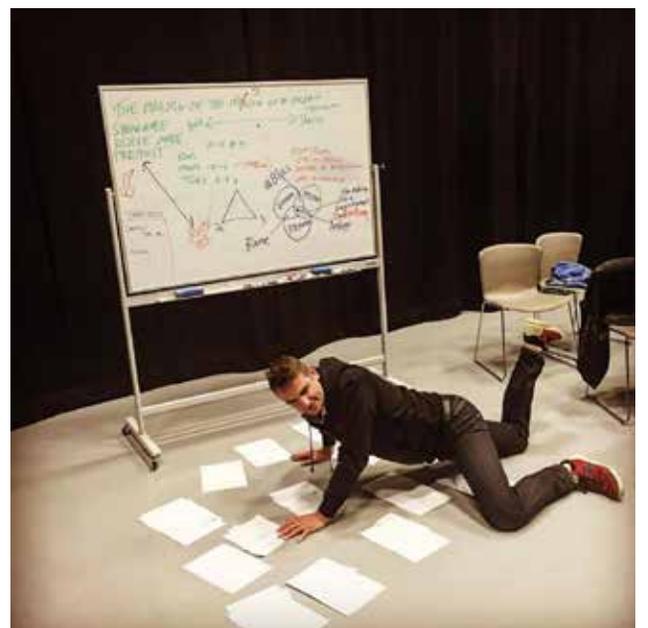
Says playwright Nachtrieb,

“I started with about 80 pages of raw material with a general idea of what was happening, and I wrote a lot of new material there. We also did a lot of just hanging out, and me trying to soak in the natural rhythms and cadence of Danny and Aysan, the way they talk to each other. We went out in the Liwa Desert and hiked up dunes and took a camel ride and stayed at this desert resort. It was a great bonding experience for the four of us, and I was often jotting down notes of funny things that were said. A lot of those utterances have made it into the play.”





Celik, Scheie, Daniels, and Nachtrieb in the desert...and in rehearsal.



DROPPING KNOWLEDGE

Director Sean Daniels knew that *The Making of a Great Moment* would need a certain... **theatrical touch** for its set. The show, after all, is all about actors.

Oh, and also: the show **doesn't stay in one place for long**. The action whisks us from auditoriums to campsites to the open road in quick succession.

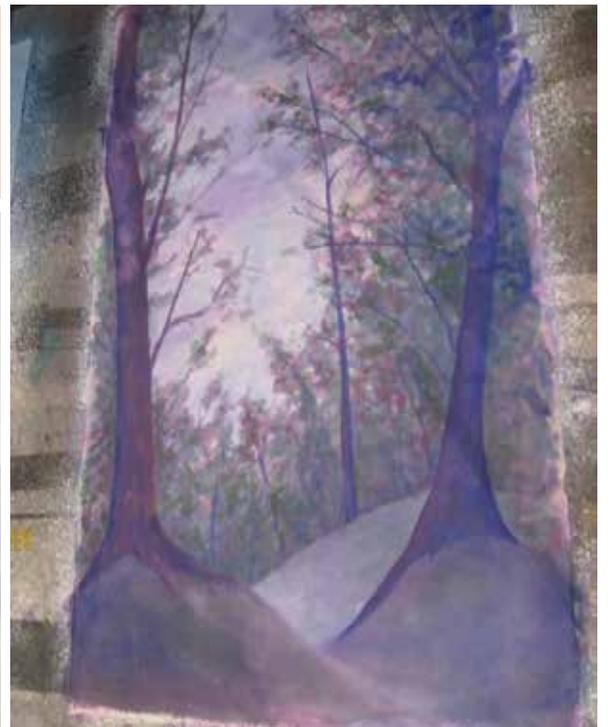
The answer he and scenic designer **Apollo Weaver** came up with: drops—or two dimensional painted scenery that sits behind the stage action.



Designer Weaver with scenic artists Sam Holderlein, Emily Holm, and Allie Herryman

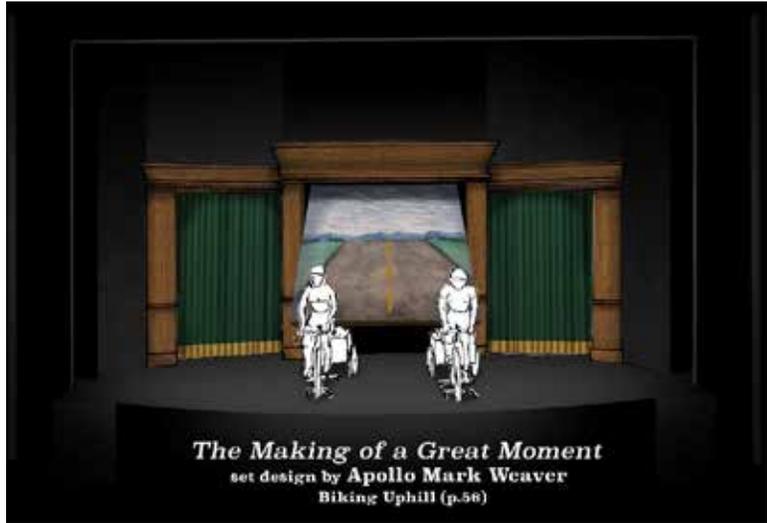
Drops are simple in concept, but tricky to create: says Weaver, “You can’t really rely on anything else. It’s just the image... you’re really relying on graphic skills, and doing a lot of visual tricks.”

And not only did Weaver have to mix 3-dimensional realism with a 2-dimensional theatrical sensibility, painting all the drops by hand – but he also had to figure out a way to bring them on and off MRT’s stage.

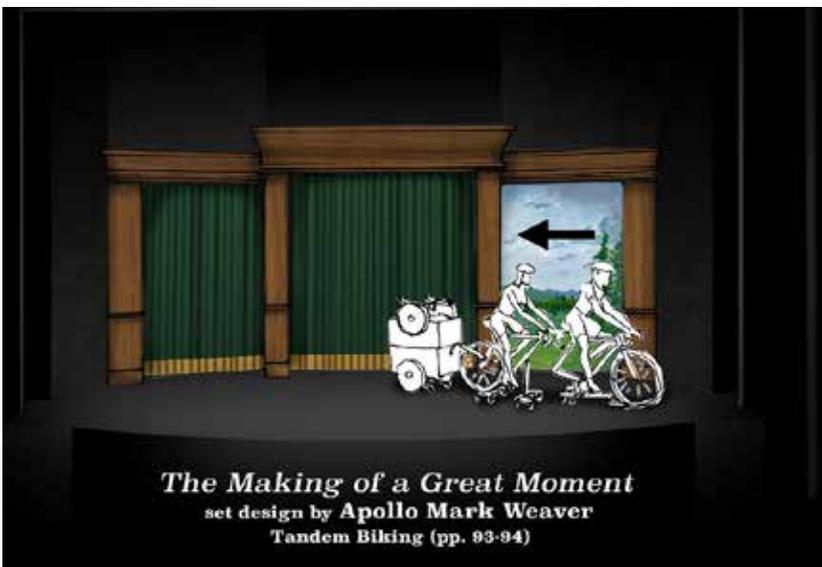
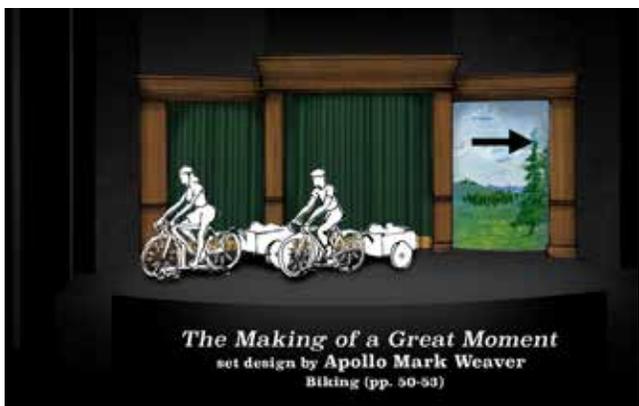


Many theatres have fly space above the stage, where scenery is stored before being “flown in.” But MRT has no such fly space. Instead, Weaver had to find three ingenious solutions:

- **Some drops will be fixed to a frame which slides in from the side**
- **Some will be rolled and unrolled from above, like a window shade**
- **And some of the drops will be sealed in a loop and wrapped around rollers, which will rotate to create a movement effect.**



All of the transitions will be executed by hand: “It adds something to have a human being attached to it,” Weaver reflects. “Plus, if something goes wrong, there’s somebody there to fix it.”



All designs by Apollo Mark Weaver

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND REFERENCES IN *THE MAKING OF A GREAT MOMENT*

Angels in America: 1993 play by Tony Kushner, a complex, metaphorical saga examining AIDS and homosexuality in 1980s America.



A stage light with barn doors

Barn

Doors:

Panels that flank a stage light to control the area where it shines.

Cats: 1981 Andrew Lloyd Webber musical based on T.S. Eliot's *Old possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which for nine years held the title for Longest-Running Broadway Musical.

Copernicus: Nicolaus Copernicus Renaissance mathematician and astronomer who formulated a heliocentric theory, stating that the earth revolves around the sun rather than the other way around.



Nicolaus Copernicus

Blanche DuBois: Fictional character from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Rosalind Franklin:

English chemist and crystallographer who made significant contributions to our understanding of the molecular structures of DNA and RNA, as well as coal, graphite, and viruses.



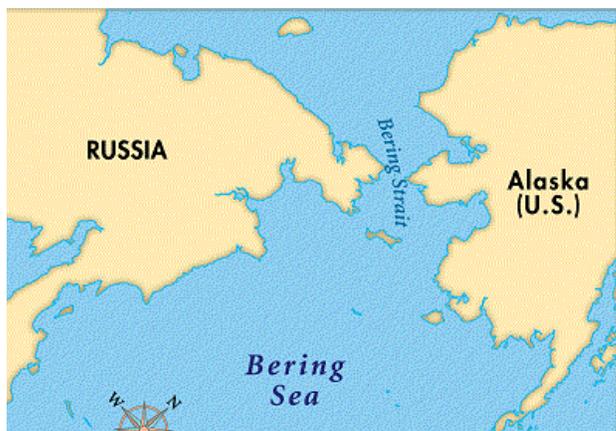
Rosalind Franklin

Gunpowder: The earliest known chemical explosive, made from sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate; invented by 9th Century Chinese alchemists.

Letzte-schlafen: In German, "last-sleep," or death.

Linoleum: Durable flooring material made from linseed oil, pine rosin, ground cork dust, wood flour, and mineral fillers.

Bering Strait: Stretch of the Pacific ocean between eastern Russia and western Alaska; believed to have once been a land bridge, over which ancient humans may have crossed into North America.



The Bering Strait

Boxing Day: Holiday celebrated the day after Christmas in the U.K. and Commonwealth nations, when servants and tradesmen would traditionally receive gifts from their masters or employers.

Mothra: Japanese horror film creature, usually portrayed as a colossal sentient caterpillar or moth; appears most often as a recurring character in the Godzilla franchise.

Neanderthal:

Species of archaic human, sharing

99.7% of DNA with modern humans. Neanderthals had shorter legs and a bigger body than modern humans, making them adapted to life in a high-altitude climate.



Le Moustier Neanderthals by Charles R. Knight (1920)



Victoria, British Columbia.

J. Robert Oppenheimer: American physicist, often called the “Father of the Atomic Bomb” for his work on the Manhattan Project during World War II.

Penicillin: Antibiotic, among the first medications to be effective against many bacterial infections.

Puma: Feline genus containing species such as the cougar and the jaguarundi.

Stage Manager: The person coordinating all logistical and technical components of a theatre production.

Harriet Tubman: American abolitionist, humanitarian, and armed scout/spy for the U.S. Army during the civil war; an escaped slave herself, Tubman made about 13 missions to rescue around 70 enslaved families and friends.

Victoria: The capital city of British Columbia, Canada, about 60 miles from Vancouver; “The Garden City,” a popular tourist destination with a thriving tech sector, it is Canada’s 15th most populous metro area.



Harriet Tubman, photo by H. Seymour Squyer, 1848



Danny Scheie and Aysan Celik. Photo by Meghan Moore

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Of all the Great Moments of Human Achievement, **which is the greatest?**
2. Do you believe **theatre has the impact** of humanity's achievements that are shown onstage tonight?
3. Mona and Terry are willing to exhaust themselves for art. **What are you willing to exhaust yourself for?**
4. Do you make art? If you do, **are you more of a Mona or a Terry?**
5. When are the moments you let yourself **"just quietly coast?"**

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- "What Explains the Rise of Humans?" (TED Talk with Yuval Noah Harari): http://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans
- *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari
- (The short version): *Summary of Yuval Noah Harari's Sapiens: Key takeaways, analysis, and review* by Eureka Books
- "35 Inventions that Changed the World," interestingengineering.com

THANK YOU

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Peter Sinn Nachtrieb

Apollo Mark Weaver