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Biz (Kimberly Ridgeway, center) and Jory (Champagne Hughes, right) are colleagues who do not see eye to eye about the fate of a company that has committed monstrous acts. Their associate, Dodge (Don Wood, right) claims “Hey, I’m Switzerland here.” | “The Human One”
Photography by Jim Norrena

Central Works Theater May Be the Bay Area’s “Best Kept Secret”

By Nicole Gluckstern

Strolling down the magnificently-tiled corridor of the Berkeley City Club you may spot a sign posted in front of a pair of heavy, wooden doors admonishing you to not disturb the theater rehearsal on the other side. Perhaps you’ll spot an actor on their way in, or hear their muffled lines as you pass.

The hybrid-gothic architecture of the Julia Morgan-designed Club lends a sense of mystery to the space. With its vaulted ceilings and warren of corridors leading to parlors, gardens, and swimming pools, it’s the perfect setting for a detective novel, or perhaps a play about detectives. Appropriately enough, [Central](#)

[Works \(http://centralworks.org/\)](http://centralworks.org/), the Club's theater company-in-residence, has produced several such shows. Few theater companies are able to make their homes in such opulent surroundings, and fewer still will celebrate their thirty-year anniversary in *any* surroundings. But Central Works, a veritable Berkeley institution known for its secret, in-house play development method, has done both.



Jan Zvaifler (left) and Gary Graves // ACT OUT Photography by Jim Norrena

Led by artistic directors Jan Zvaifler (a co-founder) and her longtime artistic collaborator Gary Graves, Central Works has carved a singular niche in the thriving Bay Area theater scene. Unlike other theater companies that might commission one new play per season, if at all, Central Works is solely focused on new works, many of which are developed in-house. In effect, it's Berkeley's most low-key startup, its "investors" a devoted cadre of subscribers willing to put their money on the line for shows that, as Zvaifler admits with a laugh, "nobody's ever heard of."

The plays may all be new—no Arthur Miller or Sam Shepard retreads here—but chances are you've heard of at least a couple of the playwrights that have developed with Central Works. Bay Area luminaries such as Christopher Chen, Lauren Gunderson ("The most popular playwright in America," according to [Slate \(https://slate.com/culture/2019/10/lauren-gunderson-profile-most-popular-playwright-marie-curie.html\)](https://slate.com/culture/2019/10/lauren-gunderson-profile-most-popular-playwright-marie-curie.html) and the [The New Yorker \(https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/youve-probably-never-heard-of-americas-most-popular-playwright\)](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/youve-probably-never-heard-of-americas-most-popular-playwright)), and novelist Cristina García (*Dreaming in Cuban*) have all developed pieces with Central Works, exploring classic literature, historical figures, and, in the case of García, contemporary novels. Others, like the opening show of their 2020 season, *The Human Ounce*, by Nicole Parizeau, are sourced through open workshops or databases, such as the New Play Exchange. Parizeau, a longtime workshop participant, is seeing her first fully produced play come to life with the company. (As she describes on her [personal website \(http://www.nicoleparizeau.net/about.html\)](http://www.nicoleparizeau.net/about.html), she has worked previously as a director of marine mammal care, a naturalist, a poet, a human-rights volunteer, and an editor at UC Berkeley's Lawrence Hall of Science.)

Despite, or perhaps because of, their unconventional approach, Central Works, which calls itself "The New Play Theater," has remained under the radar. Without the drawing power of name recognition, many of

their plays remain unacknowledged by the press, prompting one local critic, George Heymont, to [dub them \(https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chain-mail-is-back-in-style_b_2085269\)](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chain-mail-is-back-in-style_b_2085269). “the best kept secret...of Bay Area nonprofit arts organizations.” But even against such odds, and with the staunch support of their subscriber base, the company has brought close to seventy world premieres to life, and have no intention of slowing down.

At the helm are directors Graves and Zvaifler. With a BA in acting, an MFA in playwriting, and a PhD from Berkeley in Directing (“a triple threat,” Zvaifler observes), Graves not only pens and directs many Central Works plays, but he also runs several playwriting workshops a year, a reliable outlet for discovering new material—and new playwrights. One of these, the “Central Works Writers Workshop,” of which Parizeau is an experienced member, is a three-month incubator program for eight selected playwrights. Some of their writers like Cristina García and Patricia Milton, a Central Works regular whose latest play *Bystanders* will premiere with the company on October 17, prefer to develop plays in this traditional workshop setting. But for those seeking a more intensive and collaborative process, Graves pioneered the “Central Works Method,” their signature play development program inspired by London’s Joint Stock Theatre Company.

Over the course of about six months—before a single word has been written—the playwright, cast, and creative team meet for ten three-hour sessions to contribute ideas and research to the evolving piece. Roles are developed to fit the individual cast members, who are then tasked with conducting the background research for their characters—using everything from historical copy to books, music, and even personal experience. Meanwhile, the playwright works on developing a script which, about halfway through the process, is shared with the team for feedback and editing.



When asked if she's afraid of death, the lady matador Suki Palacios (Erin Mei-Ling Stuart) replies, “Tell me how you die and I’ll tell you how you’ve lived.” // ACT OUT Photography by Jim Norrena

Other theaters might hire a dramaturg to do this essential world-and-character-building research, but at Central Works the entire production team becomes the creative mastermind, giving those involved a greater sense of ownership over the production. Only one part of the process—generation of the original idea—is reserved for the playwright alone, for the sake of efficient and focused play development, Graves explains.

Once a play hits the stage at Central Works, the audience is invited through those heavy wooden doors

into “the room where it happens,” as the cast was several months earlier. Inside, the high ceiling crossed is with wooden beams. A floor of red flagstones is polished and broad. A row of iron-barred windows overlooks the garden grounds on one side, and Cathedral-like niches dot the opposite wall. The players are surrounded on three sides by an audience who, if they stretched their legs too much, might accidentally kick someone onstage. This physical intimacy is no accident. By commissioning plays in-house, the company is able to work in the performance space from the beginning, building the story to fit the environment and blurring the boundary between audience and performer.

“The thing about theater,” Graves says, “is it’s a great way of examining what you think is right and what you think is wrong in your community.”

“What’s so magical, I find, about this space is,” Zvaifler says gesturing around, “that’s the door in and out of the room, and that’s the wall, and the audience is inside. The audience is literally in the room where the action is taking place.”

For *The Human Ounce*, which opened February 15 and runs through March 22, the Central Works stage becomes an art gallery, which is dominated by a large, central painting. Set in an unnamed museum, the play thrusts the audience into a scandal that is unfolding after news breaks of the painter’s predatory past. Face-to-face with a celebrated but controversial painting, the actors, and audience are forced to wrestle with the question of how to reconcile an accomplished artist with his dark secret—and whether or not you can truly “cancel” art. It’s a timely topic, investigated by actors Champagne Hughes, Kimberley Ridgeway, and Don Wood, who portray museum workers debating the fate of the painting in question.

“The thing about theater,” Graves says, “is it’s a great way of examining what you think is right and what you think is wrong in your community, which is represented in the audience. It’s a kind of a shared civic introspection.”

With three more shows to develop for this season, Graves and Zvaifler haven’t thought too much about how to celebrate their thirty-year anniversary. They’d prefer to commemorate the year in the way that has sustained them as a company for three decades—creating new works for audiences that want to experience theater beyond the stale comfort of the classics.

“When the playwright is in the room, it’s really different than when the playwright is long dead,” Graves affirms. “When you’re doing a play for the first time, there is no tradition behind it...[and] that process of discovery is thrilling, dangerous in artistic terms, and exciting!”

[The Human Ounce](http://centralworks.org/the-human-ounce/) (<http://centralworks.org/the-human-ounce/>) plays February 15-March 22.

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