

Timbers travels on street cred

New York director set to 'Boom' at Ars Nova

by Mark Blankenship

NEW YORK -- Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's comedy "Boom," opening March 20 at Ars Nova, involves global cataclysm, plays within plays and sex at an underground lab. It may be the most conventional project Alex Timbers has directed.

In the last five years, the helmer has carved a niche with unusual, headline-grabbing projects that carry the stamp of indie credibility, even when they're produced at major Off Broadway and regional theaters. Not yet 30, Timbers is already hovering between being an experimental maverick and a mainstream player.

Rapid success has had side effects for Les Freres Corbusier, the theater company Timbers founded. The group -- which includes Timbers as a.d., an executive director and 15 affiliated artists -- rose to prominence in 2003 with its \$5,000 Off Broadway production of "A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant." The satire featured grade-schoolers re-enacting the teachings of L. Ron Hubbard; its massive buzz was fueled by rave reviews and the reported ire of California Scientologists during the show's Los Angeles run.

"Pageant" made Les Freres part of the downtown theater elite, as did productions like "Heddatron," an adaptation of Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" that included onstage robots.

But the troupe's quick growth put it at odds with the non-profit funding system, which generally awards small sums to new companies. The expectation is that over many years, the money will slowly increase with the theater's size. "We have received some grants," Timbers says. "But by the time we were eligible for many of the first, small grants, they wouldn't have made a dent."

Les Freres has been able to lean on robust ticket sales to fund its projects, also mounting several co-productions. For instance, New York Theater Workshop presented a redux of "Scientology" in 2006, and St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn helped mount "Hell House," a recreation of actual haunted houses designed by evangelical Christians.

Timbers declines to make money by touring his company's shows. "Touring is a trap," he says. "It takes attention away from actually creating work."



Photo by Carol Rosegg

Pictured: Megan Ferguson and Lucas Near-Verbrugghe

For now, Les Freres is operating on a show-by-show budget instead of a larger season plan. No new production has been announced, though Timbers suggests it will be large in scale. "The scope of it will dictate the producing and funding models we pursue," he says.

Meanwhile, he's managing his career as a freelance director and writer.

Most prominently, Timbers co-wrote and helmed "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," a rock musical about the seventh U.S. president that preemmed in January at Center Theater Group in Los Angeles. That run was co-produced with the Public Theater, but the company has not committed to a Gotham engagement. (Timbers says a New York run is likely and that Les Freres Corbusier may be involved.)

Other recent projects include the Off Broadway stints of "Gutenberg! The Musical!" a self-referential tuner about composers trying to sell a show; and "Dixie's Tupperware Party," another Ars Nova collaboration, which featured a drag queen selling actual Tupperware to her audience.

And while he won't reveal specifics, Timbers admits he's in talks with "large corporate entities" to craft a potential Broadway tuner.

There's nothing more mainstream than the Rialto, and even "Boom," for all its narrative quirks, is a straight play. But Timbers denies he's developing a taste for the conventional.

"No matter what the project is, I'm drawn to things that are in your face in terms of comedy, design or concept," he explains. "The theater can directly agitate us or implicate us like nothing else can, and I don't like watching things that let the audience stay passive."

Of course, if he helms nothing but high-concept material, Timbers might be dubbed a hype master instead of a serious artist.

"Because the body of work we've come to know him for is very flashy, he gets sensationalized as this wacky kid," says Ars Nova a.d. Jason Eagan. "But he's really grounded in what makes something substantial and heartfelt. I

think that's what people are connecting to in his work."

Timbers adds: "The idea with a lot of my shows is that I want to provide a hook -- a reason why people should see this out of all the other downtown shows. Maybe it sounds like a gimmick, but I think the trick is that if people are drawn in by that, I can give them the bonus of becoming emotionally involved."