

ISTHMUS | The Daily Page

Eight to know

In praise of artists you may have missed

by

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You can probably name the prominent players on Madison's arts scene. But they'd be the first to say that the local culture doesn't begin and end with them. Madison is a thriving and growing center for the arts, thanks to our many galleries, music venues and performance outlets, to say nothing of the cultural riches shared with us by our colleges and schools.

So we asked our esteemed writers: What artists deserve more attention? They responded with seven people, and one group, who ought to be on your mind.

Two plays, two cops

Actress **Tara Affolter** teaches English and theater arts at Madison East High School. She's also been involved in the Madison Young Playwrights Festival and has directed productions at East. Her performances have been some of my favorites during my years reviewing theater, and I've been struck by how realistically she inhabits her roles.

Interestingly, Affolter played police officers in two very different productions. In Broom Street Theater's goofy *The Maple Bluff Mystery* she was a stereotypical by-the-books cop and scene-stealer who got the biggest laughs of the night with her deadpan delivery. In Madison Theatre Guild's excellent production of *The Laramie Project*, she sensitively portrayed the first officer to arrive at the scene of Matthew Shepard's brutal attack. Her vulnerable and honest take on this character sincerely touched me. I still well up a bit when I think back on that performance.

I feel confident that Affolter defies the old adage that those who can't do, teach. I imagine her students at East are fortunate to be in the hands of such a versatile performer and proponent of her art.

— *Katie Reiser*

Art for every budget

Rebecca Peragine had just moved into a new home in Lodi, and one of her young sons was afraid to sleep in his new bedroom. She rifled through unpacked boxes and gathered whatever materials she could find. The result: a "protector dinosaur" of found paper to guard her son's bed. With that dinosaur, her company print*pattern*paper was born.

Today, all of Peragine's work contains the whimsical essence of that very first dinosaur — a visit to her online boutique, www.printpatternpaper.com, is a magical trip, with robots and mermaids leading the way through zinnias with multi-colored petals cut from discarded magazines. Her prints, stationery and textiles evoke a blur of spring colors, played out enthusiastically in paint and collage. Equally charming is pricing that makes art accessible to people of all budgets — her originals go for as low as \$120, and you can get a signed print for under 20 bucks.

And I like where my money goes. Peragine says she's "very strict" about using local vendors as she produces her prints and textiles, especially "mom-run businesses." She is also dedicated to using her art to support nonprofits — especially those that reach out to women and children worldwide.

— *Amelia Cook*

Nobody notices

It may seem paradoxical, but sound designer and composer **Joe Cerqua** says that the best compliment anyone can pay him is not to know what he's done. "Years ago," he says, "a friend and mentor told me that you've done your best work when nobody notices it. They'll simply have the experience of being affected by it."

Cerqua definitely knows how to affect his audience: He has an impressive 20-year résumé that includes local,

national and international credits. But he also knows how to affect performers. "I collaborate so closely with actors in the rehearsal process," he says. "I look for themes to underscore their performance and compose as I'm watching them grow the role."

The script and director are, of course, important to Cerqua's process, but even lighting and set design influence his work. "It's a matter of how much information is already being imparted to the audience," he says. "I can use sound to illustrate additional aspects of the story."

With the closing of Madison Rep, Cerqua's local profile has been diminished, but he's scoring *The Philanderer* for American Players Theatre this summer. "It starts with a big tango," he says, smiling. "I'm very excited about that show!"

— *Bruce G. Bradley*

From here to Carnegie Hall

When **James Smith** became director of orchestras at the UW-Madison School of Music a few years ago, he added another title to an already long list. He is also music director and conductor for the University Opera, music director and a conductor for the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras and professor of instrumental conducting.

Since Smith joined the UW-Madison from SUNY-Fredonia in 1983, his orchestras have given us warm accompaniments to operas, like *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and intuitive performances of a variety of composers from Haydn to Gershwin. Many fine musicians we enjoy in our local orchestras and ensembles nationwide learned under his baton.

Smith is soft-spoken, with wry humor that can make you laugh out loud. He deflects compliments that come his way, showering the glory instead on his colleagues, who shower them right back. Marvin Rabin, founding conductor of the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras, says that Smith is one of the finest conductors he's ever known.

Smith and the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras will perform at Olbrich Botanical Gardens on Tuesday, June 2, at 7 p.m.

— *Sandy Tabachnick*

Blast off

Artist **Scott Espeseth**'s recent work, he says with a laugh, "has the mentality of a 12-year-old boy." His drawings reflect the fascinations of a preadolescent, especially one who grew up in the '70s and '80s: "army men" figures, sharks, Sasquatch and space exploration.

A few recent drawings — done in ballpoint pen, which Espeseth says is a surprisingly good tool — recall the notebook doodles a bored but creative kid might have done in class on the cover of a notebook. Words like "Math," "Social Studies" and "Reading" are rendered in self-consciously blocky 3-D letters, and even appear to be blasting off into space, powered by afterburners. They reflect the sheer joy in drawing that a young kid might feel, yet there is also a humorous, gawky element.

"I'm interested in things that are kind of pathetic and awkward," says the artist, 34, who lives on Madison's near west side and teaches as an assistant professor at Beloit College.

Espeseth's last Madison exhibition was a memorable solo show at the Wisconsin Academy's James Watrous Gallery in 2005. Called "Backyard Premonitions," that show featured slightly earlier work reflecting his preoccupation with mundane, suburban settings spiked with menace and mystery.

See more of his work at www.scottespeseth.com.

— *Jennifer A. Smith*

Chappy on the keys

An essential if little-noticed anchor in Madison's musical life is organist **John Chappell Stowe**, known to most as "Chappy." Born in Belmont, N.C., Stowe trained at Southern Methodist University and Eastman School. In 1984 he

joined the UW music faculty, replacing organ professor John Harvey, eventually adding instruction in harpsichord. For some five years, too, he was organist at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church; currently he sings in Luther Memorial's choir.

Active as concert performer, on campus and off, Chappy is a bulwark of the Madison Early Music Festival, an enthusiastic participant from its inception. As teacher, and as harpsichord accompanist, he has trained and mentored many younger musicians. One is Edith Hines, specialist in Baroque violin, and frequent performance collaborator. As her thesis adviser, she admits, Stowe greatly shaped her own development. "I have tremendous respect for him as a musician," she says. Hines admires "how much he thinks about music", exploring its whys as well as its hows, going beyond received practice to contemporaneous sources and contexts.

"I like students to become self-sufficient, think for themselves," Stowe says. His own performing commitment is "to be intellectually and esthetically responsible to the composer's intentions."

Early Music Festival's Cheryl Rowe is awed by Stowe's talents as an all-purpose helper, great continuo player and chef. "He's as creative at the harpsichord as in the kitchen," she says.

— *John W. Barker*

Teacher's teacher

"There is no future in music. There is no past," a conductor once told me. "There is only now."

The ephemeral nature of the musical experience was just one of the paradigms presented to me by **Gerald B. Olson**. Geri, as everyone calls him, is the finest conductor I have ever seen and the finest musician I have ever known. He's professor emeritus at the UW-Madison School of Music.

Olson arrived at the UW in 1976. The wind ensemble movement was relatively new then, and Olson helped shape it by writing scholarly articles, by teaching future teachers, and by setting out mind-bending, ear-stretching challenges to student musicians.

He also conducted. In another life Olson could have been a dancer or a mime, so vividly does he separate timbre, texture, color, line and rhythm with just his hands.

Geri departed the UW in 2003, but he's still an active clinician. I had the good fortune of having been conducted by Geri many times, and more than once I missed an entrance because I was entranced just by the movement of his hands.

— *Jay Rath*

No more masterpieces

"Reading Artaud changed my idea of what Shakespeare could be," recalls Lukas Brasher-Fons, the 17-year-old producing director of **Quick and Dead Productions**. Your typical high-schooler probably isn't immersed in the vanguard Parisian director's 1930s manifestos. But Quick and Dead isn't interested in being typical.

Most members of this "indie theater" company, ages 14-20, are classically trained Shakespearean actors. But reverence for the Bard doesn't bind this crew, who seek new approaches to old plays to thrust them into contemporary life. In keeping with Artaud's famous "no more masterpieces" declaration, they aren't afraid to abandon text or tradition, staging unscripted scenes and rock music montages. Cross-gender casting, another part of the troupe's esthetic signature, becomes an anti-realist technique employed for efficiency and indicating a fluid notion of gender. "A woman might be a better Polonius than a man," observes Brasher-Fons. "But you don't have to go through tons of makeup to do it."

Quick and Dead's latest production, *Twelfth Night*, set in post-Katrina New Orleans, plays May 29-31 at MATC-Truax's Studio Theatre 206. Catch these creative entrepreneurs while they're still around — artistic director Ely Phan soon departs to study in France, and Brasher-Fons is considering some prestigious theater programs. You could be witnessing the future of the form.

— *Andrea Harris*