

# THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE

Won't You Come In?

Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl Cordially Invite You  
to Get Close to Their Latest Theatre Collaboration

By Robert Faires  
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Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl aren't just theatre artists. They're hostesses of the stage. When these two create a show, they don't stand at arm's length from the audience, coolly leaving patrons to relate to their work as best they can. They cozy up to every person who comes to their performances and invite them in, personally bringing each individual as close to the work as he or she wants to get. They take care to fashion an environment where visitors feel welcome and at ease, where you're acknowledged individually and free to engage the work on whatever terms you choose.

They may have docents in red dresses courteously whispering in your ear how you may take part in the show, as they did in their FronteraFest '98 collaboration *Dress Me Blue, Window Me Sky*. They may distribute individual cassette recorders with pre-recorded tapes directing you to the location of a performance, as they did in their FronteraFest 2000 piece *Slabber*. They may offer you a one-of-a-kind souvenir of the performance: a folded piece of paper on which is printed a unique poem or story, or a penny or hand-painted stone that you dig out of a suitcase filled with earth.

Whatever they do, it will be attentive, solicitous, considerate of your individual desires as an audience member -- to the point that if you decline to do anything more than sit and watch, they'll accommodate you just as graciously as they do anyone else in attendance. They generate hospitality, these two, treating patrons as guests in their home -- which, in a sense, they are. Pearl and D'Amour talk about the plays they create in terms of architecture, as spaces that audiences may roam through and explore. The narratives their

characters spin are where they live, the specialized environments around them our entry into them. In making theatre, Pearl and D'Amour are building homes.

It's an approach to performance that, as D'Amour described it in these pages last year, "has something to do with Getting Close and Making Room: Getting close to the audience, both physically and emotionally. Making room for intimate exchange between performer and audience. Getting close, really close, to the objects that make up the world of the performance. Making room for new experiences, new text, new risks to appear each performance."

It's an approach that rewards the viewer with a deeply personal theatrical experience, one that moves you beyond the traditional boundaries of the stage and into the performance, where your connections to the story being told and the emotions shared are heightened, where other levels of mystery and beauty within the world of the play open to you. It gives you a role in the drama and shows you the adventure that theatre can be.

Over the past four years, D'Amour and Pearl have been employing this distinctive approach in projects in Austin, Minneapolis, and New York City, and in the process they have forged an uncommon bond with audiences. They have also forged an uncommon bond with each other, a mutually fulfilling creative partnership that they believe will continue for the rest of their lives. Though the two no longer live in Austin, they have returned here this month to stage the premiere of D'Amour's play *Anna Bella Eema* with the help of their old friends at Refraction Arts Project and Physical Plant Theater. In the city where their alliance was born, they're taking it to the next level, formulating the next adventure, inviting us all to tour their new home.

### The Architecture of Intimacy

The distinctive environment of intimacy that D'Amour and Pearl create is something that D'Amour says she "stumbled on accidentally" while creating her first solo piece, *Oscar Snowden and the Magic O*, a fantasia inspired by the image of the man leaning against a giant O on the sign outside Oscar Snowden's Appliances on Congress Avenue. "I wasn't doing any performing at the time," D'Amour says. "I was only a playwright. I had the urge to perform, but I'm not really very good at performing in naturalistic plays, so part of creating *Oscar Snowden* was trying to find a style of performing that worked for me." She developed the piece in late-night cabarets at Frontera, then mounted a short run of the piece herself, "and I was a nervous wreck about it," she insists. "I knew that there was no way I would be able to get through a performance unless I felt the audience was right there with me." So she scheduled opening acts before her own performance and led into her piece in a conversational manner: "Hi, my name is Lisa. Here's what I'm going to perform about ..." It gave the novice performer a way to steady her nerves -- to be in the space, to calm down, to see the audience -- but it also inspired a more immediate connection between her and the audience, and that was something D'Amour was growing increasingly interested in.

"I think it has something to do with intimacy and the disconnect that I would often feel when I would go to other plays in bigger theatres," D'Amour says. "I had a funny

experience once watching a production of Hedda Gabler. I was watching it and it was really good, but then all of a sudden I snapped out of it and I saw everyone in the audience watching the play, and the actors weren't acknowledging the audience and we weren't acknowledging them, and it just seemed so weird! I got this feeling that there must be another tier of people watching us watch the play. So I began to think a lot about the exchange that can happen between the audience and the play, and about trying to structure a real experience for the audience."

At the same time, in the same city, director Katie Pearl was pondering the same issues. "I came to Austin from an experience of traveling in Europe where I wanted to find my heroes that I had learned about in college," she says. "While I was there, I had my first experiences working with companies that did big site-specific pieces and tiny site-specific pieces that were all about finding new structures for presenting theatrical experiences. And I was convinced at the time that the death of theatre was going to be the proscenium auditorium and red plush seats. So when I moved here, to find Lisa, who was interested in that same thing ... It was just like heaven to me to find a writer who wanted to go to those places, too. All of a sudden, I could actually do these experiments that I really wanted to do. It wasn't just me by myself. It made us both really dig into it and move forward. Now I firmly, firmly, firmly believe that for me the definition of theatre resides in that space between the performer and the audience. That's where theatre lives, and if theatre is going to move forward and continue to evolve, that's the terrain that we need to explore. "

The two met around the time of Oscar Snowden and immediately hit it off. Within a few months, they had embarked on their first collaboration: a site-specific piece called *The Grove*, set in the grassy bend along Lamar Boulevard south of 29th Street. While the two shared a general enthusiasm for the project, the early development of the piece didn't bode well for D'Amour and Pearl's partnership. Pearl had to leave town for a time to work on another show in Chicago. Meanwhile, D'Amour continued to work on the piece locally with other artists. Via e-mail, the two discovered that they wanted the piece to go in different directions. "For a while, it got very, very hard," Pearl recalls. "But we made it through; *The Grove* ended up being a great experience, and the performance had some incredibly beautiful moments (as well as some parts that were truly stinky).

"In retrospect, I believe it was the perfect way for us to start, because it was new territory for both of us. We were not relying on words (her expertise), and we were not really relying on character development or blocking or actors (mine). We were relying only on a shared hunch that something important and good was lurking within the exploration of both place and how an audience experiences it. We've gotten a lot mileage out of that hunch! The ideas we started developing during *The Grove* have become integral to every project we work on (together or separately), and are at the heart of what drives us both to continue to make theatre."

*The Blueprints of Care* (a performance text)

[The Artistic Collaborators, Lisa and Katie, sit beside each other in front of the Interviewer. Unseen threads connect the artists at temple and torso. Their movements are in sync and complementary, as if together they form a greater, organic whole.]

Interviewer: On inviting the audience into your work: Do you consciously figure out ways to ... ?

Lisa and Katie: [together] Yes!! [Both laugh.]

Lisa: And I think we're totally aware of ...

Katie: ... of that first impulse of ...

Lisa: ... "Oh my god, they're going to ask me to do something ...

Katie: ... Is this audience participation?" [We ask ourselves:] How do we make sure that people retain their own power from the first moment they walk into the space, so that it is an invitation and it is still in their control as to how they choose to participate ...

Lisa: ... and how do we make it a safe space where they can take it as far as they want to take it? In Slabber, there's an opportunity for someone to read a list out loud for the audience, and every performance I've ever done of the play someone has volunteered to do it. Because I think everyone knows that no one has to do it. Things like that -- opening up the space so something can happen.

Katie: Another thing is taking care of the audience. How do we take care of the audience at every step? The way we came up with in Dress Me Blue was the Red Dress Girls, who would tell you everything you needed to know. When you walked into that room, rather than let the audience member figure out what to do, there was somebody there to say, "You can walk over there if you want to." Always with that phrase "if you want to." And we make it very clear that it's okay if you choose not to be taken care of.

Lisa: And nobody is going to look at you funny if you don't.

Katie: That whole middle section of Dress Me Blue when you had to try all the things. One of the things we discovered is, if you want people to participate, the thing you don't do is ...

Lisa: ... have them come up one at a time ...

Katie: ... so everybody can watch. Right.

Lisa: We really believe that the audience is necessary for a lot of the experience that we create in these performances. The performance can't happen if they're not there.

Interviewer: What do you want audiences to walk away from your performances with?

Katie: A sense of ownership of the experience. That's my first instinct.

Lisa: The first word that came into my head was "spell," like they felt like a spell had been cast and they were part of what was needed to cast that spell, so that they were in a world that was a little bit different than the regular world. I always say that my naive hope is that the audience will look at things -- whether it's the "O" sign on Congress or homeless people -- that they'll notice things in a way that they haven't before they went to see the play. I have no control over whether that's going to happen with each audience member, but it's my naive hope.

Katie: I don't think it's that naive of a hope. I think it happens. I have these moments of clarity sometimes after a performance, of feeling like this is what it's really about for me. This is the most satisfying thing in the world, that the 15 people who were at the show today are going to go back out into the world and have a more immediate ...

Lisa: ... connection ...

Katie: ... connection to things.

Lisa: We leave a lot of space for the audience to decide what connection they have to the piece. We rarely say, "This is what the play is about." We try to give the audience a number of ways into the story, whether it's to just sit back and listen or to go up and dig in the dirt or open the guidebook and do the private hand experiments. They have a number of options and they can almost decide the journey they're going to take through it. A lot of times I compare my plays to houses that you can move through and explore, rather than, like, getting on a bus and going from Point A to Point B.

Katie: And I love when Lisa uses that metaphor because before we even met, I did a piece for [FronteraFest's] Mi Casa [Es Su Teatro] called 1414 Fairyland in a house and grounds, and people had a map so they could explore what they wished. It's just another example of how we were already on the same track.

The Schematics of Collaboration

Now imagine the creative partnership between Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour as a house and grounds. (It helps to picture things because both D'Amour and Pearl are so visually oriented. "I can't know anything until I see it," says Pearl. "I'm someone who needs to have visual input," says D'Amour.)

In the front of the house is a big open room -- D'Amour and Pearl's first FronteraFest project, Dress Me Blue, Window Me Sky. It's dominated by a giant canvas eye, one of several visual aids that a shy, halting D'Amour used to discuss how our eye and brain process information while she related a tale of personal loss. This piece, says D'Amour, "is a prime example of me trying to get away from words and have a more visual experience. I wanted to try using less text because my whole writing experience up to then had been about plot and narrative and characters and writing dialogue. So it started from a more visual place, an imagistic place. The activity was more collage-y. I think that was my brain and heart telling me, 'Lisa, if you're going to stay in this field, you're going to have to figure out a way to have an outlet for this visual and creative urge that you have.'"

That leads into another, almost identical room, except that it's smaller and the canvas eye isn't as pronounced. This is the second version of Dress Me Blue, produced in Minneapolis by D'Amour working solo. "It was a huge learning experience for me and Katie, because Katie didn't come, and I put it together by myself. It went fine, but it was not very fun, and I felt a little at sea without Katie's directorial eye. And even in looking at the pictures of the performance that she was not involved in, Katie could tell that she should have been there. That was when we really realized that when we create the piece together, we both need to be there when we're creating a new version."

This room leads to another pair of twin rooms: one an expansive space with carnival trappings and microphones and jars hanging from the ceiling; the other a closet containing a cassette recorder and a suitcase full of dirt. These are the Slabber rooms, for the fable of an outcast little girl shared by a quiet, vulnerable D'Amour swathed from head to toe in plastic. The first room is for the original Minneapolis version, which "was huge!" says D'Amour. It included a fair -- "kind of like the craft fairs that spring up around Grateful Dead shows," says Pearl -- with street vendors, tubs filled with holy water, and hieroglyphs made from dirt. The closet is the Austin version, which had to be scaled down considerably in order to be presented at FronteraFest. "That was a real challenge," says D'Amour. Even though the piece was designed to be reimagined for each new production, scaling it down to a few suitcases seemed to require too radical a revision. "That was the first true test," says Pearl, "and I remember there was this moment when Lisa was like, 'Katie, I can't rewrite this play every time we go to a new place. It's too much.'"

"It could have been a really frantic experience," allows D'Amour. "It was at a time when Katie was moving out of Austin, so she was trying to pack up her whole house. I was performing in Austin and New Orleans. And somehow it managed to be okay." D'Amour ascribes their success to a sort of serene acceptance of whatever comes. "There's a real sense of calm that pervades a lot of our work that I don't experience with many other people," she says. "Within the experience of making our plays and then the larger experience of our relationship together, we always try and take the circumstances that are presented to us as, 'These are the circumstances that we have and this is the time that we have and this is what the world is allowing us to do, so what can we make in this time frame?' With Dress Me Blue, it was three weeks and an empty boutique. There's always an aspect of our collaborations that are scary, but we try to minimize the amount of panic as much as possible. Creating a piece of theatre can be a lot of panic. So we try to breathe into it, see what it's going to be allowed to be."

The back of the house is where these two are spending most of their time lately. It is the Anna Bella Eema room, an add-on that resembles a trailer and where a mother and her daughter and the girl that the daughter made out of mud sit and sing the story of their encounters with construction site vampires and werewolves with false teeth. Despite the fact that this room is still under construction, you can see that it looks different from the rest. For one thing, it's built for three people instead of one, and D'Amour won't be one of them. For another, it's sparsely furnished. "In Slabber and Dress Me Blue, there were a lot

of props to take the audience to these places" we wanted them to go, says D'Amour, "and this is very stationary."

"All the places that the audience tours to -- it's all imaginary," notes Pearl. "The audience sits still, the actresses sit still, and we take this huge, intricate, incredible journey. So that's very different."

"It's a big journey that the audience takes," echoes D'Amour. "You go to a lot of places, and they all feel necessary. So it's a big challenge to make sure everyone has a place on the roller coaster for the whole ride."

But whatever challenges these collaborators are facing in the construction of this room, they aren't nervous about them the way they might have been in earlier projects. This project is, in D'Amour's words, "a sort of magic opportunity, where everything feels safe and right and great."

Part of that may spring from the fact that the two are back in Austin, a place where they feel supported, both as friends and as artists, and where they are working with old friends. But it's also because of the working relationship they have developed since their first projects. "It's always really affirming when we're working on something together," says Pearl.

"Yeah, it's always great," agrees D'Amour. "It feels so much like mutual support, like we're balancing each other out. When I work with Katie, I feel like I'm allowed to open up. It feels comfortable and natural, and I feel in some ways a confidence when I'm working with Katie. I think we've gotten to the point now where we've realized that we'll be doing work together forever."

"And that realization comes at the time when we're starting to work with other people -- Lisa with other directors and me with other playwrights," notes Pearl.

"Which has been a little odd and scary for us, actually, just trying to figure out ... it's sort of like dating, you know," D'Amour observes. "'I don't know, can we see other people?' And there's weird bits of jealousy from both of us when we hear the other one is working on another project: 'Why didn't you talk to me first?' I'd say there was a good year of not realizing that of course it's going to have to happen that we work with other people sometimes. I mean, we already know that somebody else is going to direct Anna Bella Eema next year, and it was really painful for us to even think about that."

Pearl laughs. "But at the same time I can't spend the rest of my life directing Anna Bella Eema. And it's definitely one of those plays that when directors and artistic directors read it, they're going to want to direct it. We've also really forced ourselves to talk about it and deal with it in that kind of relationship way." end story

Anna Bella Eema runs May 11-June 2 at the Blue Theater, 916 Springdale. Call 474-2448 for info.