

PEARLDAMOUR

*Lost
in the
Meadow*



*Photography by Cole Wilson
Text by Matt Caprioli*





After hours of walking through the well-kept grounds, D'Amour, Pearl, and Lien took a much-needed break on a quiet lawn overlooking the Meadow Garden.

LONGWOOD GARDENS is massive. Situated in southeast Pennsylvania, Longwood Gardens is nearly 25 percent larger than New York's Central Park. Its impressive size is matched by its fine horticulture. The gardens' paths are lined with granite fountains and exotic flowers, butterflies, and warblers. The beer gardens,

cafes, and restaurants are packed year-round, and it's nearly impossible to take a bad photograph anywhere on its 1.6 square miles.

One of its less trafficked and less manicured parts is the Meadow Garden. Of Longwood's sprawling grounds, it was this site that captured the imaginations of Mimi

Lien, the MacArthur Fellow-winning theater designer, and Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl, the duo comprising the Obie-award winning experimental theater company, PearlDamour. The trio was one of the 50 artists/companies invited by Longwood Gardens and the People's Light Theater (based in Malvern, Penn.) to propose to stage a site-specific piece

within Longwood's 900 acres. They spent a weekend exploring Longwood, meeting the staff, fellow artists, and "letting our imaginations run wild," as Pearl said.

As they sat gazing out at the 86-acre meadow, the three simultaneously realized that few spaces at Longwood offered the immense vantage point they were now experiencing. As they looked down the meadow at people, small as ink blots, winding down its paths, they were inspired.

For director Katie Pearl, the site displayed an "accidental choreography" that reminded her of ancient Chinese landscape paintings.

"The composition was laid out there in front of us," Pearl said. "The way people were moving and the accidental synchronicity of their bodies. It was amazing to watch. From so far away, they were only an inch high."

Writer Lisa D'Amour wondered what these people were saying and where they were going. She imagined characters exploring the meadow, and the type of stories they would tell themselves within that reality.

With blocking, stories, and visuals sculpted purposefully to the terrain, the three believed they could create something magical. They imagined the audience would sit on the lawn overlooking the meadow with headphones of prerecorded dialogue. They would see actors exaggerate their movement as they crossed the meadow, jumping as they walked or spinning through cornfields to make their motion visible from a great distance. They would move toward the audience, starting off far in the distance until they were just a couple feet away, imposing on the audience their all-too-human form. And most critically, they would build a massive tower during the performance.

"Before we knew what the story was, we knew the piece would be about these sort of mystical messages from the earth," D'Amour said with a laugh. "Early on, we were obsessed with what it would mean to amplify a voice that was inside the earth." Toward the performance's conclusion, one of the actors "plugs" in a megaphone to the tower. The tower then becomes a radio tower, that then "speaks" through the six actors.

"It felt like it had it had a life of its own," designer Mimi Lien said of the meadow. "I think we were each instantly hooked by the possibilities."

"The meadow immediately places you in a contemplative state," said D'Amour. "It encourages you to think of your place in the universe, to ask what is the scale of a human being in such a large landscape."

The team submitted their proposal, one of a few dozen, and waited.

Pearl and D'Amour have worked together for nearly two decades under the tag PearlDamour. Their pieces are known for re-engineering the relationship between audience and performer. In *Bird Eye Blue Print* (2007) they led audiences through an empty office space in One World Trade Center. In *Slabber* (1999) audiences met in a parking lot, where each member was given ten pennies to shop in a makeshift flea market as they made their way to the main performance. PearlDamour has been commissioned by The Whitney, and



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produced a sort of manifesto in the 2001 published dialogue, “How to Agitate the Theater of the Perfectly Harmless,” where they argued that in great contemporary theater “the audience knows they have come to a risky place, but the place is built with such skill that they feel confident enough to take risks there.”

Longwood Gardens awarded Pearl Damour and Mimi Lien the commission in 2011, but the trio couldn’t start in earnest until late 2013. When they did reconvene at Longwood, their first move was to take turns reading D’Amour’s script. They brought on board Brendan Connelly, who composed the score audiences heard through their headsets.

Reading the script aloud was something Lien found invaluable for her process. “I always say as a designer, I like building models more than I do drawing. I don’t sketch my ideas that much. I generally build rough models in three dimensions. For me, that’s one step closer to reality. And my process is very much about doing, and then responding to it.”

In early workshops, they had ten actors walking around the meadow with walkie-talkies. Pearl directed them to perform gestures to determine if she could read them from the audience’s point-of-view on the lawn. “It requires this weird, large-scale acting,” Pearl said. “When you’re hundreds of yards from the audience, they’re only going to see you if you’re making giant motions.” Sometimes an actor had to jump up and down during their cue. “But,” she added, “it didn’t look like that from where you were sitting. It just looked like they were walking.”

Other workshops were dedicated to untangling the realities of building a 50-foot tower in a short period of time. They tried two different towers, one 40-foot and one 60-foot, eventually deciding that 50-foot was optimal. It took several workshops to figure out how to portray a story in an 86-acre plot of land while building a 50-foot high tower. “I’ve dealt with a fair amount of building codes,” Lien said. “But the thing that was unique about this is that some of the work was happening as part of the performance. Whereas other structures that I’ve built that are this tall are built by licensed riggers at a time when the audience isn’t there, so they could take all the time they need.”

It was essential that the tower be built within the scope of a performance. The building of the tower served as a sort of scaffolding for the six characters journeying through the meadow; by the end of the performance, it’s clear that they needed the tower to “hear” what the meadow had to say.

“All of these characters are Pilgrims that have basically kind of wandered out of civilization in search of some kind of meaning.”

It also “kept some mystery in the air,” D’Amour said. “What are those builders doing? Whenever we came back to them they were involved in

another part of the process.” It kept audiences returning to discover more.

“It’s always exciting to see something really happening on stage and that’s not being faked.”

D’Amour added. “(Pearl) and I are both interested in the actual act of building as being a kind of narrative.” This literal narrative building has been a part of previous works like *How to Build a Forest*, an eight-hour performance installation where a team of seven constructed a simulated forest.

During the 18 months the team worked on *Lost in the Meadow*, the script was constantly responding to the logistics of the piece. D’Amour compared it to writing a radio play. Once she finished her first draft, sound designer Nick Kourtides and Pearl recorded a draft of the entire script and practiced on-site. They found that it could take a character longer to get from point A to point B, or that one character’s dialogue distracted from an important part of the tower’s construction. Kourtides was constantly responding to these changes in the script because of the demands of the meadow. He recorded multiple rough-cuts and spent hours adding sound effects and layering in Connelly’s composition to create the final recording. The music was critical for the audience because, as D’Amour said, “It taught the audience where to look. It was as though each set of characters had their own musical theme, and then the tower had its own musical personality.”



BOB WEICK



NICHALAS PARKER | DAVID REECE HUTCHISON

“We had to carry scissors with us the entire time,”





DONNA SELLINGER



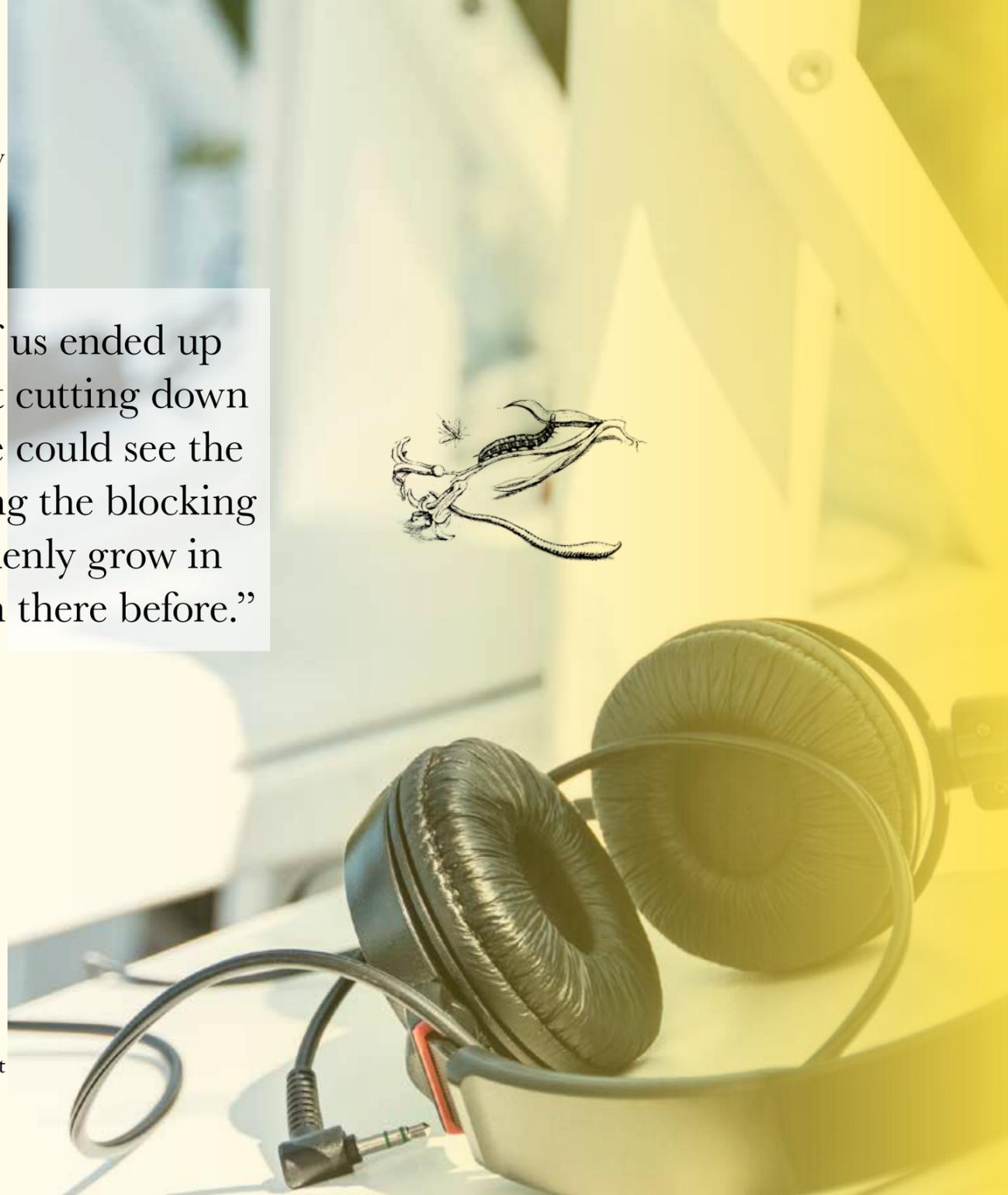
SOFIE YAVORSKY | JOHN BASILIUS

True to Lien's initial impression that the meadow had a "life of its own," the meadow was constantly in flux, and the height of grass and flowers varied tremendously from fall to spring. "Anytime you do a site-specific piece you don't know what the site is going to require or how it's going to become a partner to you in the process," Pearl said.

"One of the things all of us ended up doing was spend hours just cutting down sunflowers so the audience could see the actors. I had to keep shifting the blocking because bush would suddenly grow in three days that hadn't been there before."

Even in the first two weeks preceding the show, the meadow was changing. "We had to carry scissors with us the entire time," Pearl said.

The performances happened during two weekends in September 2015. As planned, the audience was presented the type of surreal contemplation the trio had felt when they first chose to lounge on the lawn four years earlier, but now the experience was carefully crafted. Through stereo sound design in the headsets, the audience experiences six different stories. Separately, builders in orange neon outfits mount giant megaphones along the tower. D'Amour said, "It was truly surreal. You saw these little humans holding a megaphone, and there were times with the music that it looked like an animation."









The builders planted a megaphone at the top of the tower as if plugging it into the earth. The audience heard a crackle. The sounds seemed to be coming from the earth.

“It really was an altered state. We kept on comparing it in this embarrassing way to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It really felt like this mythical, alien event.” The pairing of an “alien” object in a natural setting, along with the “Audio Magic” (Pearl’s phrase), helped.

With the tower speaking, the actors rushed toward the audience, entreating them to remove their headphones. Suddenly, figures who for most of the performance were nearly 600 feet away, were now a couple feet from them, speaking occasionally overlapping monologues of what the meadow, a reflection of their life, seemed to be telling them. “So these characters,” Pearl said, “you’ve built a relationship only through hearing their voices and seeing them so far away are suddenly right in front of you and speaking to you urgently. That was a really intense and emotional experience for people.”

The trio agreed that the project’s success came from having all creative forces contribute from the performance’s genesis. As Pearl said, “The magic was really achieved through this careful interplay of all these design elements coming together to create this crazy, beautiful fiction.”



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DIRECTION | KATIE PEARL
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COSTUME DESIGN | JILL KEYS
COMPOSITION | BRENDAN CONNELEY
SOUND DESIGN | NICK KOURTIDES
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