

FRONT & CENTER

■ DENVER

THE DAY YURI GAGARIN WALKED THE SPACE DOG



From left, Nolen, astronaut Bruce McCandless and Martinez.

James Kronzer's set design model for *Terrence J. Nolen's Denver Center Theatre Company*—commissioned premiere—a main-stage *Colorado New Play Summit* attraction that docks at its Space Theatre through Feb. 27—calls for three concentric revolves. “They can go in the same direction or take opposite turns,” Martinez says.

“We can switch their speeds. That’s how we will portray weightlessness.”

The prolonged experience of weightless travel becomes so fundamental a theme and metonym in *When Tang Met Laika* that it rocks the destinies of its two married protagonists. As the American astronaut Patrick tells Elena, the Russian cosmonaut, “I went home looking for someone to understand me, but only those of us who have seen the world from a distance can really understand one another.”

Rogelio Martinez loves to write impossible stage directions. In *When Tang Met Laika*, a haunting star-crossed love story that orbits around the post-Cold War efforts of the Russian and American space programs to build an international space station, the Cuban-American playwright imagines such doozies as “Two astronauts negotiate zero gravity” and “A giant robotic arm descends from above. The arm holds Zarya [the Russian space station] in place.”

In answer to Martinez’s bold appeals,

“So few people,” Martinez explains, “have seen the world from the point of view of someone floating in space. How do you live your ordinary life on earth once you’ve experienced that?”

Weightlessness also drives the political purpose of sundry other fictional and true-to-life space travelers who people Martinez’s drama, which was developed at the Perry-Mansfield New Works Festival in Steamboat Springs, Colo. At one point, Willie McCool, the pilot on the ill-fated shuttle *Columbia*, spots Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, while the latter is walking Laika, a dog, the first animal to have orbited space. “You are the first American to see me—that is hope for future,” Gagarin says. “What do you mean?” McCool responds. “Orbiting Earth in the spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is,” Gagarin says, quoting McCool. “People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it!” *You said words just like mine. We are the world’s last hope. We must figure out way to be friends here so that we can be friends below.* —Randy Gener

■ WASHINGTON, D.C.

A HUNK LAUNCHES 1,000 SHIPS

IT’S HARDLY THE OBVIOUS choice to re-imagine the story of the cursed and violently haunted Orestes with playful, cross-gender double casting. But that’s what director Aaron Posner and “transadapter” Anne Washburn have done. The *Folger Theatre* premieres *Orestes: A Tragic Romp*, a modern-dress reformulation of the Euripides play, through March 7. The role of the woman with “the face that launched a thousand ships” is inhabited by a beefy middle-aged man who plays three other characters as well—including one of Helen’s would-be murderers. Electra, played by a woman, is doubled with the character of Helen’s father. Washburn notes the translation is faithful, and the essence is still all Euripides. “The energy, the inventiveness, the cynicism and the sophistication,” she says, “is that of a bitter and brilliant 74-year-old man sitting at a desk almost 2,500 years ago.” —Nicole Bournas-Ney

■ CHICAGO

‘THE RING’ ROCKS OUT

JOANIE SCHULTZ, associate artistic director of Chicago’s *Building Stage*, has been having coffee and conversation with Richard Wagner. Imaginary coffee and conversation, of course, since the great German composer passed on (to his personal Valhalla, one presumes) some 127 years ago.

What prompted this fantasy date? As a primary collaborator on a new, rock-infused theatrical adaptation of the master’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at Building Stage, currently in previews and opening Feb. 13, Schultz felt obliged to seek the late maestro’s counsel, as best she could, during the ambitious, six-hour project’s creation.

“I like to think that he would nod understandingly and bless our production,” Schultz maintains after communing with Wagner’s ever-present, presumably caffeinated spirit. “The fact that we’re not using his opera score might be offensive to him,” she concedes, “but we haven’t thrown it out entirely. What we’re creating is not a “watered down” experience of Wagner, but a new point of view on it.”

Building Stage founder and artistic director Blake Montgomery—who shared the task of whittling down and modernizing Wagner’s massive 16-hour *Ring* with Schultz, dramaturg Stephen Raskauskas and rock composer Kevin O’Donnell—figures that being “a bit more simple than Wagner was able to be” will make the opera’s famously complicated tangle of myths handier for contemporary audiences to digest. The show, he notes, complete with onstage band and a picnic lunch break, is billed as “not an opera, a play that rocks.”

“If Wagner hung out at our rehearsals,” Schultz speculates after all that coffee talk, “he’d see that what we’re creating is still what he set out to do—to create an encompassing event that entertains, overwhelms, excites, indulges and exposes audiences—and makes them think.” —Jim O’Quinn



COURTESY OF BUILDING STAGE
Ring Rhinemaidens in rehearsal.