

## Englishwoman in New York

Sarah Benson takes center stage at Soho Rep

by **Brian Parks**

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**Director Effect: Sarah Benson**

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The tunnel starts at an undisclosed location in London. It bores westward under the ocean, jags a bit at the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, rises through the denser rock of the continental shelf, and ends at New York City's Soho Rep, where it deposits British artistic directors.

Or so it seems. When Sarah Benson takes over on October 14, she'll be the third Brit in a row to run the highly regarded downtown theater. "It was bizarre when I was hired," says outgoing artistic director Daniel Aukin, a London native, "and it's bizarre this time." Julian Webber, another Brit, ran the place for the eight years prior to Aukin. None of them knew each other before their stints at the theater, which was founded in 1975 by two plain-old Americans, Marlene Swartz and Jerry Engelbach. Soho Rep had a particularly strong run under Aukin, solidifying

its reputation for well-produced, idiosyncratic playwriting. During his tenure, the theater won an Obie Award for its 2003 revival of Maria Irene Fornes's *Molly's Dream* and multiple Obies for Melissa James Gibson's 2001 [*sic*].

"What's unique about Soho Rep," says Benson, explaining the philosophy she'll use to run the Walker Street theater, "is its position in the New York landscape. Although we're nestled in the downtown community, we're also making *plays*. We're very downtown in one sense, but we're also interested in good design and the things many small companies don't have the resources for. It's about work that's specific to the theatrical idiom—not a TV show, not a film. And work that can only be made by a specific artist or group, whether Richard Maxwell, Melissa James Gibson, or Young Jean Lee. There's nothing interchangeable about a Soho Rep production."

Benson, 28, graduated from King's College London and worked with the theater group Arion before a 2002 Fulbright brought her to Brooklyn College's directing MFA program. Part of the award was a job at Soho Rep, who then hired her in 2004 as associate artistic director and co-chair of its Writer/Director Lab. For the past two years she has also co-curated the Prelude Festival at the CUNY Graduate Center, which is a kind of tasting menu of avant theatrical work scheduled for the upcoming New York season. This year's ambitious four-day event concluded September 30 and featured performances by Collapsible Giraffe, Carl Hancock Rux, and Tent, among many others.

Benson is cautious about naming writers she'd like to produce at Soho Rep, but notes that "Prelude is a good example of my playwriting aesthetic." With that hint and a gander at the Prelude schedule, one might expect to see the literate alterna-plays of people like Jason Grote, Will Eno, Thomas Bradshaw, Jenny Schwartz, Amber Reed, or Nick Flynn. Benson also wants to make Soho Rep's script-development programs "more of a continuum" with its main stage, and hopefully increase the number of annual productions from the currently modest two. Their new season begins October 5 with Adam Bock's *The Thugs*.

As for Aukin, he'll be "seeing what it's like not to run a theater for a while." He has several directing projects in the pipeline, two of them film adaptations of plays he directed at Soho Rep: Quincy Long's *The Year of the Baby* and Mark Schultz's *Everything Will Be Different*. He also spent this past summer at the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab working on Gibson's new play, a modern-day version of *The Odyssey*, which he calls "the best thing she's ever written." As for his Soho Rep legacy, Aukin would like to be remembered for "identifying and supporting visionary plays with a real emphasis on integrated, rigorous design." It's a legacy the dynamic, well-connected Benson seems primed to both honor and expand.