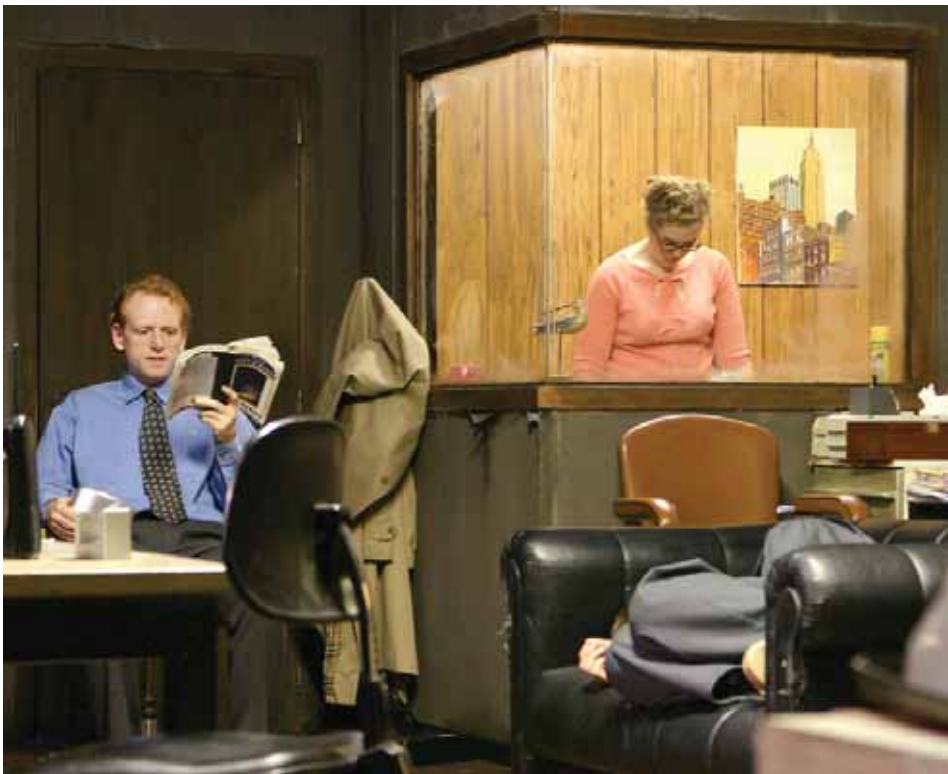


The journey to Egg Island

Telling Gatsby's story on stage

BY LAURA C. KELLEY



CHRIS BEIRENS

Scott Shepherd and Susie Sokol in Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival.

SCOTT SHEPHERD READS with a flat, measured voice. "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since."

He's sitting in a shabby office where a nondescript company's papers are passed and filed, phone calls are taken, and letters are signed and sent. Ambition, if it's present at all, must be packed among the file boxes on the steel shelves. According to the clock on the desk between the computer (which doesn't work) and the

typewriter (which does), it's always 9:40. Outside in the living city, car horns bleat and wailing sirens pass.

Shepherd has pressed "escape"—first on his keyboard, repeatedly, waiting for his computer to boot properly. When that fails, he grabs a book and begins to read aloud. This escape works. Big time. The bored office worker becomes the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. So he's also Nick Carraway, a participant in the great American tale of recreating yourself from an un-

known Midwesterner to the alluring host of glamorous parties on New York's Egg Island.

And the audience becomes immersed in Fitzgerald's words—every single one of them is used—and the subtle, simultaneous drama of the office. It's a wondrous tumble down a theatrical rabbit hole. Fitzgerald's distinctive writing and the production's multilayered storytelling stimulate the imagination. You don't even notice that over seven hours (counting two intermissions and a dinner break) have passed from that first line to "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

The production, entitled *Gatz* (Gatsby's true surname), was created by the theatre ensemble Elevator Repair Service. It was performed in September during the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, followed by short runs in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle. Touring is the show's life. Since spring 2006, it's played in Brussels, Amsterdam, Zurich, Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen, Vienna, and Lisbon. The American premiere was in Minneapolis (Fitzgerald's hometown), at the Walker Art Center in September 2006.

And what about New York, the city that lies at the heart of the novel?

Nope. (Unless you count the sort-of open rehearsals that Elevator Repair Service held while developing the show in 2004.) *Gatz* is in exile because the Fitzgerald estate granted New York stage rights to a musical version by California playwright Simon Levy. Levy's *Gatsby* has played in Minneapolis and is not on the New York radar at this time. Philadelphia is as close as Elevator Repair Service has gotten to its home base with *Gatz*, and many New Yorkers took the two-hour train ride to see the show.

Director John Collins finds the situation absurd, even laughable. "We finally hit this point where we were ready to tackle this major literary work and take a big risk with it and it all worked out," he said. "It all worked out. We made our most ambitious piece and it turned out to be

our most popular. But we hit this little snag, which basically meant, 'But you cannot perform it in New York City.'

Even so, *Gatz* has been a huge success for the ensemble. Audiences and visibility have grown. "We've been able to translate that into a better, more stable life for the company," Collins said. He was able to quit his day job as sound designer for the Wooster Group to work full-time for Elevator Repair Service. (He founded it in 1991 with a group of actors, including Shepherd.) Salaries have increased to "something closer to a living wage," Collins said, noting the significance of that as company members age.

The artistic attention is also paying off. "We'll vault our way out of obscurity with this piece," said Collins. New York Theatre Workshop channeled its thwarted interest in producing *Gatz* into an advance commitment to the next Elevator Repair Service show, based on Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*. (The new show won't follow the *Gatz* model where the imaginative experience of reading seeps into real life and co-workers become characters. Instead it will have to find its own theatrical voice.)

Collins, Shepherd, and company discovered the framework for *Gatz* while developing the show in a convenient yet dull office that sharply contrasted with the story's glossy world.

"John tends to like something that's real that we can latch onto, that's somehow not just pretending," Shepherd said. "Reading books provided that—doing something that is really happening in the room, which is that the person is reading this book out loud. You don't have to pretend anything to go through that ... We could just pretend to be in the kind of office we just might end up in, being the kind of people we are."

He laughed and continued. "The pretending-to-be-a-glamorous-person is actually part of the show, where

we have these humble office workers kind of dreaming or getting projected onto this other world, and that lends a whole different kind of poignancy to it."

The novel's narrator becomes the audience's guide. Nick Carraway relives conversations and conflicts with Tom and Daisy Buchanan, golfer Jordan Baker, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, Jay Gatsby, and the rest of the seductive and shady 1920s world Fitzgerald both revered and skewered. Shepherd reads most of the story. Susie Sokol—as a co-worker with an interest in golf, the novel, and Shepherd—takes the book briefly to tell Jordan's backstory. Colleagues speak the dialogue of their Gatsby counterparts, sometimes while coming and going with their paper-shuffling business.

The office couch where a bored worker flops to read a magazine easily becomes crowded with exuberant partiers at Tom and Mrs. Wilson's apartment, as music blasts and paper flies. Shepherd reads quickly, straining to be heard over the din and to keep the book open as he climbs over people and balances his drink. There's one big mess to clean up in the office the next morning. Props are as choreographed as the actors, and when the story fades from a dramatic whirl of people to solitude and despair, the props, too, disappear.

Ben Williams's sound design and Mark Barton's lighting bring crickets, frogs, and the green beacon of the unattainable Daisy Buchanan into the dingy office. The sense of fog is chilling. Later, the sound of the accident when Mrs. Williams is hit by Gatsby's car helps make the offstage events as vivid as those we see. The words about the ensuing chaos and shock feed the voices, postures, gestures, relationships, and pace—a full storytelling toolkit at work.

Gaffer's tape covers the spine of *The Great Gatsby*. The novel appears dog-eared even from the tenth row. The book is just for appearance. Shepherd memorized its nearly two

hundred pages long ago. In the final chapter, he begins to flip back through the pages, then closes the book and continues the recitation. Gatsby is dead, Daisy has left. Nick Carraway must reclaim his own life. First he takes ownership of Gatsby's story, as the one to observe and preserve the end of an enigmatic life. Shepherd moves down the nearly bare stage and testifies to the audience about Carraway's memories. You realize that the swirl of an Egg Island summer is one episode, perhaps a defining one, in a greater arc. There will be more to Carraway's life than the characters we've spent the afternoon and evening with.

If Collins and Shepherd get their wish, the cast of *Gatz* will live with these characters more often. A typical tour schedule is just two or three shows: part one on Thursday and part two on Friday, then both parts (with a dinner break) on Saturday and again on Sunday. "One unfortunate thing about having to do the show in these short bursts is we have to start over every time we do it," said Collins. The company must rewrite light cues, position the set, and, soon after, pack it back up for awhile.

"What they deserve at this point," Collins said of his cast, "is to just settle in to running the show and have the relationship be just between them and the audience, over time, instead of, 'Your entrances are going to be slightly different here because the wall is closer,' or 'You have to be a little bit louder in this part here because this is a much bigger theatre.' I think a New York production, or really any production where we could sit in it for a little while, would help the show get to the next step."

If ownership is the storytelling theme of Nick's journey, it is the heart of the show's bigger story, too. Even without a New York production, Elevator Repair Service has claimed, honored, and celebrated *The Great Gatsby* and its readers. ▼