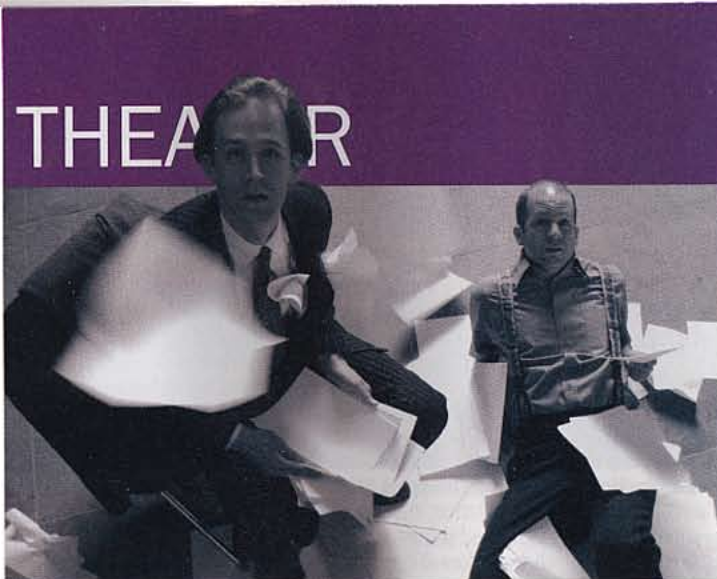


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MONEY**

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RIDE A TIME SHARE AND 13 OTHER
WAYS TO MAKE A QUICK BUCK

+
Catherine Keener
working behind the Money



PAPER BOYS Dennis Grimes and John Zinn get reamed in *The Violet Hour*.

that five-year-old Uma aims to bring to its work. Given the constant criticism the city's popular visual-spectacle troupes endure for not being substantive enough, and the difficulty kitchen-sink-realism theater companies can have finding 21st-century audiences willing to take them seriously, it's certainly not a bad idea.

"To me, space is a character in the play," Garver says. "Before the audience even gets into an office [in *Violet Hour*], they'll walk down a long hall of doors that leads them to the set. And when they get there, they find themselves in a little hole in the wall."

Producing on a shoestring, naturally, the itinerant Uma is forced to be crafty with its resources. "I have \$1,200 for the set," Bembridge says. The ubiquitous, never-sleeping designer, who's simultaneously designing the set for *Love Song* at Steppenwolf, has a budget of more than 15 times that for the latter project.

To meet the wizardlike demands of the paper-generating machine within a modest budget, the *Violet Hour* team employed crack tech geek G. Warren Stiles (who works regularly with the House Theatre). Stiles's solution couldn't be more resourceful: remote-control cars whose wheels spin wildly, spitting endless sheets of paper out onto the set.

"We're going to try to rig the remote controls into the light board, so the stage-management team can

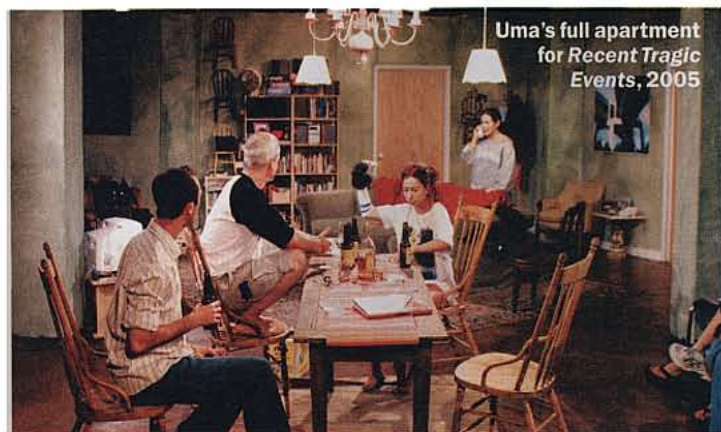
You are there

Uma Productions daringly makes audiences part of the set **By Christopher Piatt**

When we stepped into the basement of the Chopin Theatre last fall for Uma Productions' *Recent Tragic Events*, we made embarrassing faces at what we found there. So accustomed were we to the dank studio with the massive, obtrusive pillars that storefront designers have to work around that when we realized we'd just entered a complete, fully furnished four-walled apartment (designed by Brian Sidney Bembridge), we got as wide-eyed and slack-jawed as the big-phony residents on a home-makeover show, who act stunned that their breakfast nook has been magically transformed into a Wild West saloon.

It's worth noting, p.s., that the play was terrific as well. Under the direction of Uma's 26 year-old artistic director, Mikhael Tara Garver, Craig Wright's serio-comedy about Minneapolis urbanites awkwardly trying to cope with September 11 seemed to fulfill the promise of the show's original *New York Times* review: "You can see how, properly cast and timed, it might be more affecting than annoying," chief critic Ben Brantley said of Wright's whimsical play (which marked the auspicious stage debut of forever-Rollergirl Heather Graham). And sure enough, at \$15 a seat and with an unhinged non-Equity cast, *RTE* scored big with audiences, critics and the Jeff Citation committee, which gave the show its first recommendation.

Uma is following up that success with a new mounting of *The Violet Hour*, Richard Greenberg's impish Lost Generation play, which requires an offstage Rube Goldberg contraption that generates reams of paper and spits them rapidly onto the set. Once again, the troupe is immersing the audience in a completely environmental, four-wall set—this time a dingy publisher's office—that technically places the fourth wall directly behind the audience.



And one more thing: "We're lowering the ceiling to eight feet, six inches," Bembridge says with a laugh. Audiences seeking plenty of overhead clearance are officially warned.

"I felt like I was seeing a lot of physical theater in Chicago, and a lot of emotionally grounded theater, but nothing that connected the two," Garver says of the style

just run the car wheels from their seats," Bembridge says hopefully.

It's a convenient move, but also an appropriate one, considering no other theater company at the moment does more to bring the action directly to your chair.

The Violet Hour begins previews Monday 10. See Fringe & storefront.