

Interview with Michel Hausmann

Kathy Hersh: We are in the Colony Theatre on Miami Beach, interviewing Michel Hausmann, who is the executive director of the Colony Theatre.

Michel Hausmann: The founder and artistic director.

Interviewer: Founder and artistic director.

Hausmann: Yes.

Interviewer: Today's date is October 12, 2018, and my name is Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Michel for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. Tell us about the exciting play that's going to be happening here.

Hausmann: This is our second full season here at the Colony Theatre. The show we have to open the season is a show called "One Night in Miami." It's about the night that Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston a couple blocks from here, at the Convention Center – one of the most unexpected victories in the history of boxing.

Of course, celebrating with his entourage on Miami Beach in 1964 wasn't easy. Right? I mean, even though he was a champion of the world, he couldn't stay there the night. After the fight, he went back to the Hampton House with his best friends, who were Jim Brown, Sam Cooke, and Malcolm X. Four of the most iconic men, most iconic Black Americans of the '60s, were, in real life, best friends.

They spent the night at the historic Hampton House. We, of course, don't know exactly what happened that night, but we do know what happened right after that night. There, we can deduct the importance of that night. The playwright Kemp Powers, who is also a journalist, did a really impeccable journalistic job trying to imagine what could've happened that night.

Here's what we do know that happened right after. The morning after, Cassius Clay changed his name to Cassius X on his way, a few days later, to be named Muhammad Ali. Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam a few days after this encounter. Jim Brown left football to become an activist and an actor, and Sam Cooke – after having a whole career of doing love ballads and soul songs – released, really, a political song, which was "A Change Is Gonna Come," that became the anthem of the civil rights movement.



The playwright Kemp Powers – together with the extraordinary director Carl Cofield – recreated what could’ve happened that night. The play is incredibly timely. This is, of course, an archival project, so I don’t know if these people are going to see this 20 years from now. With the moment we’re living in right now, it’s a very ugly time for those of us who think that inclusion, equality is an important thing. This is a very dark time.

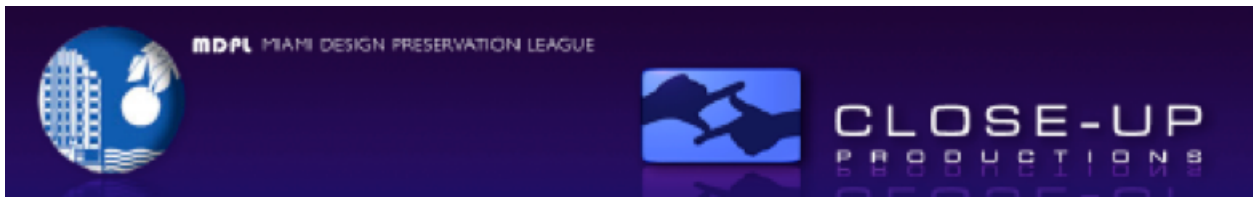
This play started to be written and performed for the first time in 2013. It kind of felt, in a way, like you go there to a museum piece that is alive, and then you left the theater saying, “Wow, look how bad we had it back in the ‘60s, but we have now an African-American man who is our president. How far has this country come along? Let’s congratulate each other.” That is not the response you have watching this play today.

The playwright has since always continued to work on it. I think that it’s shocking to see, deep down, how little things have changed below the surface. I think on the surface, there has been great improvement because of people like them who really activated for it. There has been – it’s impossible. You have the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, desegregation... It’s unbelievable, but deep down, the fact that a candidate can say things that can be considered racist or bigoted and yet still be elected president of America shows that on the belly of this country, we’ve not changed that much.

Interviewer: Do you think this play has the power to change people?

Hausmann: I believe that theatre has the power of changing the world. That’s why we do theatre. That’s what we believe here at Miami New Drama. You’re never going to see us doing whatever was popular in New York last year. I don’t care about that. I think that in fact, we in America have castrated theatre. We have divorced theatre from politics and made it this flavor that anyone can just digest and it’s this thing that we like. That’s not saying that theatre can’t also be very entertaining and very exciting. I think that this show is a wonderful example of a show that bites really hard, but also during the whole hour and a half, you are moved and you’re in tears and you laugh, etc.

Deep down, the essence of theatre has always been to change society. The Greeks, who invented theatre – their plays were extraordinarily political. Shakespeare was extraordinarily political.



Molière – the man was jailed. Theatre has always been political. In this day and era, we like theatre that doesn't bite too hard. I think that part of the reason of Miami New Drama is to do theatre that is always in conversation with what's going on in our community of Miami, or in our larger community of America and the world.

Interviewer: The author of the play – is he a Florida native?

Hausmann: No. Kemp Powers is from LA. The director of the show – who directed the first few productions in this one, what we hope is the final production before the play gets published or transfers to New York – Carl Cofield, is from Miami. He's a Black Miamian. His mother went to the Hampton House when she was younger. He is the first to tell you that it's a failure of the educational system of when he was growing up that he didn't know that Sam Cooke, Jim Brown, Malcolm X, and Cassius Clay were together in the Hampton House in a day that really ended up changing or defining the civil rights movement and defining America. So much history happens here in Miami, and we just are not aware of it.

We're a very young city, but we must not forget to tell properly the story of who we are, what have we done to each other, in order to understand, really, how we can move forward. Miami is, compared to the rest of the country, we are more diverse, more multicultural, more multilingual than America as a whole, but America is slowly moving to the direction of Miami.

We actually have an opportunity. We have a vantage point to figure out, what does the metropolis of the 21st century look like? My personal voyage or journey is, how does the theatre of the 21st century look like? How can you create theatre for an audience that is extraordinarily diverse, and how can you bring everybody together to help create community?

Interviewer: Would you say that this play is one of the most ambitious projects you've undertaken? You were describing the scenery and all that.

Hausmann: Absolutely. This is, for sure, one of the most ambitious plays we've done. The casting of it was very hard, because it's not every day that actors get to play four of the most iconic men in America. This is most definitely, I think, our most important politically. I think that we always try to hit close to the bullseye. This one, we got the bullseye, and we're really excited.



Interviewer: When did you come here and take over as artistic director, and what drew you here?

Hausmann: A decade ago I was in Venezuela. I was artistic director of a theatre company that had grown in the past decade to become one of the largest in the country. By that time, we were doing revivals of Broadway shows. We did some new work and some important work as well. We were a very big company. We ended up having a very complicated relationship with the government of Venezuela, with the oppressive Chavista regime – so much so that there was a boycott of one of our shows and then another show, we were attacked with tear gas. Not pretty, but it really made me understand that I could not stay in my country and do the work I want to do.

Interviewer: You are Venezuelan?

Hausmann: I am Venezuelan. At that time, I'd just gotten married and wanted to start a family. We knew that Venezuela was not the place. I went to do a master's in theatre directing at Columbia University as a way of transitioning. It was an extraordinary experience – opened my eyes. It was led by Anne Bogart, which is one of the most important directors in the world, teaching six students. It was really a unique opportunity.

Then after the three years that the program lasted, I started to direct off-Broadway and on the regions, but there was something that I felt, really, was missing. What I really liked about the work I did in Venezuela was a conversation with the community. For example, when we did "Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde" with Moisés Kaufman, we kind of helped bring gay rights and marriage equality into the conversation. Articles were written about it. We invited nonprofits to be part of the production, and I liked that conversation that happened. When you're a freelance director, you don't really get to choose much what you do. You just apply for jobs again, etc.

I had written a musical called "The Golem of Havana," that had performed to success at the La MaMa in New York. Then it received a production that I also directed at Barrington Stage Company in the Berkshires. All that more or less happening at the same time, this longing of wanting to have a lifelong conversation with a community really drove me to Miami, which was a place that I knew very well growing up. Miami's a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Venezuela, so it was a common destination for vacations. The big Venezuelan exile... there's a big diaspora of Venezuelans living



now in Miami – Doral, Weston – and my small Jewish community copy-pasted itself to Aventura. It's the exact same community I knew there. Now everyone lives in Aventura.

There were a few things that interested me about Miami: one of them was that this is the only metropolis in America without a major regional theater. We used to have Coconut Grove Playhouse, but that went bankrupt 15 years or so ago. I think it really went bankrupt in the way that most other theaters have also been lowering their seating capacity, because demographically, this city has changed a lot. A lot of people doing theatre had not noticed, it seemed, because when you have 65 percent of residents who are Hispanic and 20 percent who are either African-American or Black Caribbean, you look at certain seasons and you say, "Where is this? This can happen in Hartford, in Fargo, in Kansas City. Why does this season need to be Miami?" I think that because of that, there's a large part of the population who did not feel included in the theatrical conversation.

I felt that I understood a lot of the big communities that live in Miami. I'm an exile. I left my country for political reasons. Up to a certain point, I don't want to compare myself to Cubans, but in fact, I had to close down my business, my everything. I understand that community very well. Miami Beach is a very Jewish city, and I understand that community very well. I felt that it was a good fit.

When I left New York, people said, "Why are you leaving the best city in the world?" I said, "Yes, New York is the best city in the world – but what did you do to make New York the best city in the world?" I think what we have here is the opportunity of shaping the next great American metropolis, and that is exciting.

With that, I came here. I had a really, really horrible first year and a half. Everything that I thought I was going to do didn't happen. People promised things and didn't deliver. I found myself here with no salary. I sold my New York apartment. No salary. My wife – then we were pregnant again, so it was a really dark time. I was very afraid. Suddenly, I didn't know how to start my project.

I decided to produce here at the Colony Theater. I rented the Colony Theater to produce the musical I had written, which was "The Golem of Havana." It was a very expensive ordeal. We spent a lot of money of my own and friends and family. I remember people – even from the county, who are lovely people, the culture



[16:24][inaudible] – they called me and said “Michel, you’re trying to do a four-week run at a theater that is 417 seats. That’s not how it works in Miami. Look at all other theaters. Look at [16:35][phonetic] Gables Theater – they’re 150, etc. You’re thinking of when you were producing in New York or in Caracas. I am concerned about you losing money.” Hey, of course, we are a nonprofit, so they feared that it was just going to be a one-show company and then fold.

The miracle was that “The Golem of Havana” sold out the four weeks – so much so, we had to open a fifth week that also sold out. I think it was the highest grossing show in the history of south Florida, or at least in the recent history. I knew then that I had some political capital that I needed to spend fast, because political capital devaluates by the day.

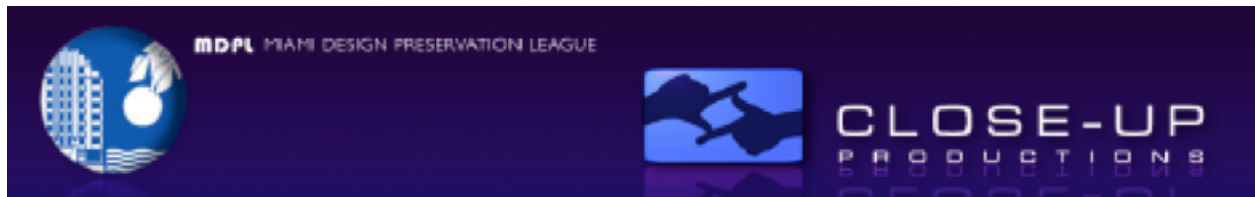
I approached the commission of Miami Beach and I told them, “Listen, you have the most amazing and beautiful theater that is being underused to a degree that is shameful. This is maybe 40 nights a year. It’s run by a for-profit company that have no knowledge at all of theatre. Why don’t we work together? Why don’t you give it? Let’s make a deal with our nonprofit and let’s turn this underused venue into a world-class culture institution,” and they agreed.

I am in shock and thankful to that commission for taking an extraordinary risk. They had seen “Golem,” so they knew what I could do. Then we started a two-year pilot program. We just finished it last week, and we now signed a five-year agreement. The city now is doubling their support of –

Interviewer: That’s the city of Miami Beach?

Hausmann: That’s the city of Miami Beach. For the last two years, Miami New Drama has been the operator, manager of the Colony Theatre. We went from having 50 performances a year, before we took over, to 200 performances a year – 100 of which, we produce ourselves. Then we team up with other nonprofits or artists, etc. We’re really glad to say that we delivered on our promise. Before I was a candidate, I think I was the first person to be surprised by the fact that we could actually deliver on what we promised.

The anchor of this place is our theatre season, which is four relatively big shows a year, all as multicultural, diverse, and dynamic as the city itself.



Interviewer: Your reversal of fortune had a real short turnaround there, from one and a half years of misery to “bingo.”

Hausmann: Yes. Miami is fertile ground.

Interviewer: How much of the audience comes from the beach itself?

Hausmann: That’s a very good question. I think definitely, our biggest group is from the beach – maybe about 30 percent of our audience. It’s the city where most of our audience comes from, but we also bring a lot of people to the beach. Seventy percent of our audience comes to the beach, then 86 percent of them stay and eat at a restaurant or have drinks, etc. The economic impact that we’ve had on Lincoln Road is in the millions every year.

Interviewer: Can you tell us something about the history of this theater?

Hausmann: This theater was built and opened 1936 as a Paramount Palace. Back then, the film industry was vertically integrated, meaning that a studio produced the films, they distributed themselves, and then they showed it. That was the law of the land until the early ‘50s, when it was broken up, and so by that time, the theater, in a way, lost its palace. Eight hundred and forty people fit in here. Now, it’s 417. I have no idea how. I have no idea. I can’t even imagine, even on a very strict South Beach Diet, how we can fit here that amount of people. Anyways, they did.

Then it would change owner to owner. It became different things. In the ‘80s, it was given to the city of Miami Beach. They made a series of renovations. The last one occurred in the year 2006. They created a fly space above the stage. In that fly space, above it, they created the dressing rooms. That, in a way, gave the theater a more professional quality. Now, the type of things you can produce here – you can really achieve a level of excellence by that big improvement.

Since then, there’s a lot of money put into the theater, into the building, but then not into the, “Okay, now what do we do?” I am very happy, again, that the city decided to turn this place into an artist-led building. I think that is the key of why we were able to turn, so quickly, the theater around. We became, from a theater before of a few hundred thousand dollars a year, to now, we are a two million a year theater. Next year, I think we’re going to be two and a



half, and by the time people watch this, hopefully we'll be much more.

Interviewer: It sounds like you're planning a long-term investment of your time.

Hausmann: If we treat our environment the way we should and the city still remains above sea level, then you'll see me here.

Interviewer: I'm struck by the pitch of the seating here. It strikes me as steep. Is that the case?

Hausmann: Yes, and I love it. There are a few things that I wish would be different, but because it's so steep, nobody's that far from the stage. Although it's big – 416, that's what we would call a very big off-Broadway house – it feels very intimate.

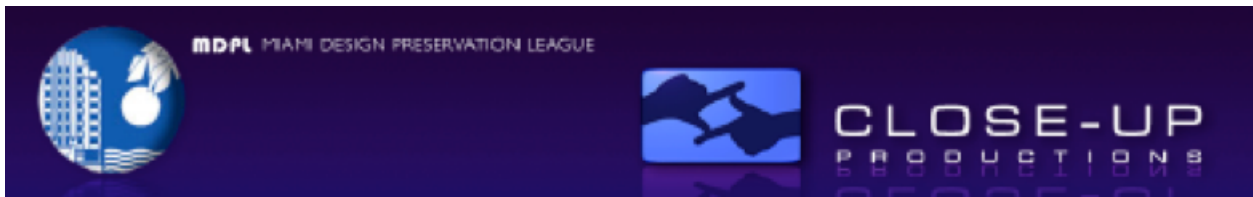
My one pickle with the building is that there is a lot of space between the stage and the first row. I also don't like the fact that if you're sitting in the first row, you kind of have to tilt a little bit to see. It's only in the third row where you get kind of direct. What we typically do is we extend the stage. We extend the stage to the third row, and that brings a very intimate relationship with the audience. When we do that, I think that it's the best theater in the planet.

Interviewer: You feel that the city of Miami Beach is very supportive of the project here?

Hausmann: Absolutely. I am very thankful to the city of Miami Beach, to the Miami-Dade County, the office of Michael Spring, and the Knight Foundation. I think that we are extraordinarily lucky to live in a city where those three institutions exist.

Interviewer: How many years was this, then, a cinema?

Hausmann: Well, it's a good question. Part of the problem is that there's not a lot of records on this building – even in the city. We know what we can find in newspaper stories, etc. Even now, it still has the capacity to be a cinema. When we got the news that we were going to be given the theater to manage, it was sometime in the summer of 2016. I had seen the trailers of a movie – a local movie by a local director and screenwriter – and I thought it looked so interesting and beautiful that I wrote to the screenwriter, who is a fellow person I knew. I said, "Listen, your movie seems amazing. Do you guys have a place to do the opening yet?" and he said, "No, we don't." "Well, I'm going to get the theater on October 1 - the Colony



Theatre. I would love to give you the theater for free, including labor, to premiere your film.”

They were very, “Thank you,” and they accepted. They were very grateful, so they premiered here – a little movie called “Moonlight.”

Interviewer: [26:48][laughs]

Hausmann: It went on to win an Oscar that year. You see, HBO has done premieres here and Netflix. When we can schedule it between shows, we’re always happy. We also have film festivals here – the Black Film Festival uses this as their main venue, so we always are very excited to bring the film community to this venue as well.

Interviewer: Tell us about the premiere of “Moonlight” here.

Hausmann: It was very moving. The premiere of “Moonlight” was so moving. The whole cast was here, the director... the house was full. When we were watching the film, there was an energy that I can’t describe. It was as if everybody left a few inches taller. It gave us pride. We were moved. It was really a very beautiful event. I think that the magic of that night stayed in the theater for a while.

Interviewer: I think that’s very true. I think theaters do take on an aura. Wow. What was the date of that?

Hausmann: Must have been October 10 or something. It was immediately after we took over.

Interviewer 2: Currently, you are anchoring one end of Lincoln Road.

Hausmann: Right.

Interviewer 2: The other end of Lincoln Road also has a dramatic anchor, with the New World Symphony. Miami, for a long time, was not considered a cultural center, but do you see this as part of a change?

Hausmann: Absolutely. I think that we are living in exciting times now. For a while, there were few important cultural institutions. New World Symphony is a good example of an institution that is, I think, 30 years old, that has really brought in a level of excellence that this [29:14][inaudible] really needed – Miami City Ballet, as well.

The past 10 years have seen art bustle – the PAMM, the Pérez



Museum, the whole design district, the private collections on Wynwood – and now, I think that there is a new generation of artists that are really trying to take on the reins of their fields. A good example of that is Sam Hyken with Nu Deco Ensemble, which is an orchestra of the 21st century, and they are doing extraordinarily well selling out the performance at the Light Box, at the Arsht Center, at New World. The work they're doing is phenomenal, and it's very Miami – very multicultural, very diverse.

I think our friends at O Cinema have also created a space for the type of films that were not shown here in Miami. I think that our friends at O, Miami Poetry Festival have really given Miami the Capital of Poetry. I am—

Interviewer: We have the book fair.

Hausmann: We have the book fair, Mitch Kaplan...

Interviewer: [30:27][crosstalk] The Miami International Film Festival...

Hausmann: Yeah, exactly – we have the film festival with Jaie leading it. For example, those two – which is the book fair and the film festival – they're extraordinary. They're part of the college. I'm not saying that to lesser... but in fact, how lucky they are to have the support of such a rich institution. The O, Miami, the O Cinema – those started as independent, like we did – independent artists with a vision, in the same way that Mitch Kaplan started the book fair.

I think that I feel really bad for people doing theatre everywhere else in the country, because we are doing theatre for the future here in Miami. As America becomes more and more diverse, it's going to start to look more like Miami, so we have a vantage point. We can really go ahead and produce theatre for a multicultural, multilingual society, which is what America will be by the year 2050.