

THEATER



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Members of Amphibian Stage Productions certainly haven't been afraid to get their feet wet. The indie theater group includes, from left, Jonathan Fielding, Kathleen Culebro and Chad Jung.

In just six years, Amphibian Stage Productions has leapfrogged past other independent theater companies, finding fans from Cowtown to the Big Apple

THESE FROGS have legs

By MARK LOWRY | STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER



SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM/RICHARD W. RODRIGUEZ

Michael Muller, Jonathan Fielding and Evan Mueller, from left, star in Amphibian's *Below the Belt*.

Below the Belt

■ Thursday through July 16; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays
 ■ Texas Christian University, Studio Theater, 2800 S. University Drive, Fort Worth
 ■ \$20
 ■ 817-923-3012; www.amphibianproductions.org

She can't remember the initial attraction, but Kathleen Culebro started collecting frogs at age 10 in her native Mexico City.

"They say if you get a frog as a gift it's good luck," she says.

As luck, or coincidence, would have it, the web-footed creatures have shadowed the 43-year-old ever since.

Her father, the late Carlos Anderson, founded Señor Frog's, a coastal-themed restaurant with 13 locations in the Americas. Then Culebro went to graduate school at Texas Christian University — home of the Horned Frogs.

So when she and some other TCU students and alums decided to start a theater company in 2000, the name Amphibian Productions leapt to mind. The group took its logo from an Amazonian Yanomami Indian carving of frogs facing each other, and the namesake fit its mission: to produce innovative theater in two worlds, Fort Worth and New York City.

Now in its seventh season at TCU, Amphibian Stage Productions — the group recently added a middle name for clarity — has over the years amassed a boast-worthy collection of its own.

Among the items on the 'Phibs knick-

knack shelf: increasing financial support from foundations, corporations and private donors; national recognition among theater insiders as champions of newer and underproduced plays; and a local reputation for superior production values, acting and directing.

Even more significant is a growing base of rabid fans so loyal that they flock even to Amphibian's staged readings at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Generally, staged readings are not social-season highlights, but the 'Phibs consistently fill the Modern's auditorium.

Amphibian's summer season of fully staged works begins Thursday with Richard Dresser's black comedy *Below the Belt* and continues in August with Edwin Sanchez's drama *Icarus*.

The assets named above are the kind of treasures that are difficult for an arts group to unearth so early in its history. They've made Amphibian a big fish in a Metroplex independent-theater pool that, in the past decade, has seen few success stories.

"The stuff they do is so different and so innovative," says Sandy Myers, 55, a grant writer and fan of Amphibian since the group's second season. "Sometimes you go into [a] theater and wonder if it will be good. With Amphibian, you know

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you're going to walk away satisfied. You might not be happy and you might feel disturbed, but you'll be satisfied."

Making the leap

In a 2000 interview with the *Star-Telegram*, Culebro said of the group's mission: "We're not necessarily interested in entertaining for just pure entertainment's sake... We want to do shows that have changed our lives as artists, that we look around and say, 'Why isn't anyone else doing this amazing show?'"

Over the years, Amphibian has offered respected dramas (Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*, Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain*), commercially minded comedies (*Matt & Ben*), a world premiere (Crystal Skillman's *4 Edges*) and several American premieres, including a curiosity performed in complete darkness, *The True History of the Tragic Life and Triumphant Death of Julia Pastrana, the Ugliest Woman in the World*.

"Amphibian wants to challenge the audience without making them run away, and I think that's tricky to do," says New York-based David Miller, who directed *4 Edges* and is at the helm of *Below the Belt*. "Some groups are so busy doing their own art, they forget there's an audience in the room."

Tina Parker, co-artistic director of Dallas' Kitchen Dog Theater, the Metroplex theater group whose sensibilities are most similar to Amphibian's, says that in a largely conservative region with limited financial backing, it's important how you walk that line.

"When our theater [started] up in the early '90s, there weren't a lot of people willing to take on these kind of plays," she says. "We've been able to foster an audience that have come to recognize the value of these works, and they now crave it. Because of that we haven't had to compromise our mission."

When Amphibian launched, Fort Worth's theater scene was going through changes. Long dominated by two-decade-old founder theaters, in 2000, the Cowtown scene saw the births of Amphibian, the now-defunct MoonWater Theater Company and the still-hanging-in-there Box Theatre. Sage & Silo Theatre had been going strong for a few years but would soon fizzle out.

In Dallas, the independent theater scene was booming, thanks to the Festival of Independent Theatres. Only a handful of those groups still exist, and even fewer produce shows outside of FIT — namely WingSpan Theatre Company, Echo Theatre and Theatre Quorum.

"When we decided to start Amphibian," Culebro says, "I think it was from a lot of naivete. We started out as this family and had to grow into professionals."

Among the six TCU students who founded Amphibian, three are still actively involved: artistic director Culebro, actor Carman Lacivita and lighting designer Chad Jung. The latter two have the title of "artistic associates," along with Jonathan Fielding and company manager Sarah Jung.

The group's frog collection now boasts about 30 company and affiliated artists, many of whom are based in New York

or elsewhere but who work with Amphibian as their schedules allow.

A froggy future

The addition of staged readings, as well as the expense of flying actors between here and New York, explains the extreme jump in Amphibian's annual budget. In 2000, it was a mere \$5,000. By 2005, it had grown to \$80,000. This year, it's \$126,000. The readings, begun in 2004, are also probably one of the reasons Amphibian's Fort Worth audiences stay loyal — fans get a nibble in spring, without having to wait until summer for a show.

Susan Sargeant, founder of Dallas' WingSpan, which typically produces only two shows a year, knows the dangers of not having a full season.

"You get a push from a well-received play," she says, "but everybody wants that self-satisfaction again. The plus is you leave [audiences] wanting more, the minus is that they want more."

One advantage Amphibian

has is its relationship with TCU, which gives the group a summer home. Aside from the Modern readings, Amphibian has produced only one local show outside of TCU, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* at the Fort Worth Community Arts Center.

"We could find our own home," Culebro says, "but why not put the pain and the heartache into good shows [instead of] paying an electricity bill?"

The 'Phibs plan to continue lily-padding to New York but will stay based in Fort Worth, perhaps moving up to three fully staged productions in 2007. In subsequent years, they'll add shows, eventually producing a six-show summer festival.

Given their current success rate, that future looks attainable — as lively as Culebro's froggy menagerie.

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