

# New Era<sup>AT</sup>

## BLOOMINGTON PLAYWRIGHTS PROJECT

BY **Jeremy** SHERE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Shannon** ZAHNLE

This past December, before the debut production of the Bloomington Playwrights Project's new, award-winning comedy *I Am Grock*, BPP Producing Artistic Director Chad Rabinovitz gave a curtain talk, welcoming the packed house to the newly renovated theater and thanking the sponsors.

"That ticket stub in your pocket is not just a heartfelt reminder of the cathartic event you're about to experience, but also a coupon for a \$5.99 large one-topping pizza at Papa John's," he began. The audience joined Rabinovitz for the kicker, reciting his by then well-known refrain in unison: "Papa John's pizza—it's the only pizza I eat, and the only pizza you should eat." The sold-out crowd laughed appreciatively, perfectly primed to enjoy the show.

Today, sold-out BPP shows are the norm. But only four years ago, packed houses at BPP's then-dilapidated theater were an

anomaly. And sponsorships by the likes of Papa John's (and many local businesses) were non-existent. Despite producing new plays for more than 30 years, BPP was still very much a fringe organization on the edge of Bloomington's arts and culture scene.

Now, thanks to the efforts of Rabinovitz, Managing Director Gabe Gloden, and a rejuvenated collection of staff and volunteers, BPP has undergone a near-miraculous renaissance. Subscriptions have doubled. More shows have sold out and more tickets have been sold in the past year than in any previous year. Since Rabinovitz's arrival in 2009, BPP has fielded more than 1,000 new play submissions from all over the world.

"I want to be clear that we're building on twenty-nine years of prior work and success," Rabinovitz says. "We've found ways of taking that next step, by focusing on our mission of producing the best new plays. And I'm happy to say that strategy is working."

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)  
BPP Producing Artistic Director Chad Rabinovitz delivers a heartfelt, amusing curtain talk before a performance of *I Am Grock*.

The dynamic duo: Rabinovitz (right) and BPP Managing Director Gabe Gloden.

*I Am Grock* actors Emily Goodson and Jeffery Allen.

Rabinovitz and *I Am Grock* playwright Amanda Rogers give notes to the cast.



Tough Times

Just a few years ago, BPP was in a much darker, even desperate place. Local actress and BPP regular Emily Goodson remembers preparing to act in a matinee performance of *Chicks With Dicks II: Battle With Cannibal Sluts From Outer Space*. Moments before the curtain rose, she peeked out from the wings and saw that there were only three people in the audience. Goodson wasn’t overly surprised. After all, it was Easter Sunday.

“I remember being on stage in front of a near-empty house, and thinking, ‘Why on earth are we doing *Chicks With Dicks* on Easter?’” says Goodson, 28, who’s been involved with BPP since she was a junior at Bloomington High School North. “It was embarrassing; I didn’t even invite my friends to the show.”

The Easter Sunday debacle was arguably the starkest example in a series of events that by 2009 had threatened to shut down the organization. Four years earlier, BPP management had taken the ambitious but costly step of moving from its location on South Washington Street to larger digs on 9th Street between College and Walnut (the theater’s current home) and took out a hefty \$200,000 loan to build a theater in the bare-bones, garage-like space. Around the same time, BPP hired a full-time managing director to oversee development and marketing, putting even more pressure on the organization’s already strained budget.

“I remember being very clear that, in order to afford the hire, we had to see a dramatic increase in ticket sales and fundraising,” says Gloden, who was BPP’s public relations director at the time. But as the economy began to sour in late 2007, ticket sales and donations began to dry up, and what was already a shoestring budget withered to a filament. Unable to regularly heat and cool the building, BPP’s beleaguered staff froze in the winter and broiled throughout the summer. Marketing and production budgets were slashed, creating a downward spiral whereby lower-quality plays and less publicity resulted in even fewer ticket sales, leading to further budget cuts and less potential to attract new donors and sponsors.

After nearly 30 years of weathering the financial ups and downs common to so many arts-oriented nonprofits, BPP had come to a definitive crossroads.

Enter Chad Rabinovitz

The tide began to turn in 2009. Despite the organization’s recent decline, Artistic Director Richard Perez had helped put BPP on the national theater map during his decade-long tenure. So when Perez left to become associate artistic director for Chicago Dramatists, the BPP board was able to attract nationwide attention in their search for his replacement. The finalists included Chad Rabinovitz,

**RIGHT:**  
Rabinovitz and Gloden before the set of *I Am Grock*.

**OPPOSITE RIGHT:**  
The BPP lobby, before and after the \$100,000 renovation.  
*Photo by Ashley Athey*

**BELOW:**  
Rabinovitz (far right) performing on stage at a special event with Tony Bennett, Audra McDonald, James Naughton, Paul Newman, Glenn Close, and Joshua Bell at the Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut. *Courtesy photo*



a young, soft-spoken artistic associate at the Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut.

Rabinovitz seemed destined for Bloomington. A few months before coming here for his job interview, during a theater event with Playhouse patron Joanne Woodward, the famed actress and wife of Paul Newman, Rabinovitz mentioned that he was up for a job in a college town called Bloomington. John Mellenkamp, who happened to be sitting at the same table, perked up. “Where did you say?” he asked.

“Bloomington,” Rabinovitz answered. “Ever heard of it?”

“I knew who he was, of course, but I had no idea he was from Bloomington,” Rabinovitz recalls. At the

end of the evening, Mellenkamp shook Rabinovitz’s hand and wished him good luck.

As it transpired, Rabinovitz didn’t need luck. Impressed by his extensive theater experience and especially by his business and marketing savvy (he has a dual degree in theater and business from the University of Pittsburgh), the BPP board voted unanimously for Rabinovitz. He accepted the offer and by September 2009 had taken over as BPP’s producing artistic director.

Although Rabinovitz knew that the organization’s finances were in trouble, he was stunned when he looked at the books. At his first meeting with the BPP board, Rabinovitz described the situation in



**‘Chad’s excitement is contagious, like a little bonfire that’s grown into a forest fire.’**

—George Pinney





**TOP:**  
Gabe Gloden and Daniel J. Petrie in BPP's best-selling *Still the River Runs*.  
Photo by Ivona Hedin

**BOTTOM:**  
Cosmo Clemens, Hannah Slabaugh, and Evan Mayer in *Kissing Frogs*, the best-attended show in the 32-year history of the BPP.  
Photo by Ivona Hedin

**‘My goal was to focus on new plays that could start here and had the potential to move all across the globe—plays that Bloomington could later say, “We did that first!”’—Chad Rabinovitz**



**TOP:**  
The new era officially begins: Frank Buczolic, Kathleen Walker, Brett Gloden, and Gerard Pauwels in *Cadillac*, the first BPP show directed by Rabinovitz.  
Photo by Ashley Athey

**INSET:**  
Shane Cinal, BPP's resident set and renovation designer, was ready to leave when Rabinovitz arrived but was convinced to stay. Says Rabinovitz, “Shane does brilliant work and I couldn’t afford to lose him.”

**BOTTOM:**  
Rabinovitz worked with Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman in Connecticut before coming to Bloomington. He is pictured here with Woodward at the Westport Country Playhouse. Photo by K. O'Rourke

stark terms: Unless things changed quickly, by the end of the year they'd be \$80,000 in the hole. “When I came in, I knew it was going to be a challenge, but I didn't know that I'd have to worry about paying myself the next day,” Rabinovitz says. “When meeting payroll becomes a basic problem, that's a scary situation.”

Rabinovitz's first, seemingly paradoxical, move toward righting BPP's finances was to increase production budgets. “The biggest pitfall of a financial crisis is cutting the product, spending \$500 on a show instead of \$1,000,” he says, “because then the core thing that we do, which is produce new plays, suffers.” And so Rabinovitz and his staff funneled as many of their meager resources as possible into set design, lighting, costumes, and other key elements of high-quality productions. They also began searching for better, sophisticated new plays.

“The material BPP was doing before I got here was interesting, but some of the plays, like *Chicks With Dicks*, appealed to more of a niche audience,” Rabinovitz says. “My goal was to focus on new plays that could start here and had the potential to move all across the globe—plays that Bloomington could later say, ‘We did that first!’”

Money was scarce and fundraising anemic, but Rabinovitz was heartened by the wealth of talent in and around BPP. Shane Cinal, an IU design student who had designed, built, and painted the set for the 2009 show

*Naked in the Kitchen*, was ready to leave, but Rabinovitz convinced him to stay on. “Shane does brilliant work and I couldn't afford to lose him, so I said, ‘I'm going to make things better for you and help you in your career,’” Rabinovitz recalls. Encouraged, Cinal stayed.

Perhaps more significantly, in Managing Director Gabe Gloden, Rabinovitz had the ideal right-hand man—a dedicated, tireless worker as devoted to BPP's mission as Rabinovitz himself. For his part, Gloden was thrilled to have Rabinovitz on board. “What I liked about Chad right away was that he was eager to listen and learn about the state of the theater instead of assuming he could change everything at once,” Gloden says.

Despite barely making payroll and worrying about paying his own bills, Rabinovitz, with Gloden at his side, was determined to make it work. “I knew it was a risk taking this job, but it was a calculated risk, and I had a plan,” Rabinovitz says. “At our first BPP board meeting, I said that my goal was to get to a place where if the theater were to burn down, the entire community would rally to build it back again. I wanted to make BPP indispensable.”

### Reaching Out

Alongside improving BPP's productions, Rabinovitz and Gloden set out to revamp the organization's dwindling subscriber base. During his first week on the job, Rabinovitz sent handwritten notes to every BPP subscriber, introducing himself and thanking them for their patronage. He and Gloden also began to explore relationships with potential partners, some of whom had been put off in the past by BPP's productions of politically extreme and sexually explicit material.

The key to success, Rabinovitz and Gloden knew, was putting a better product on stage. Given BPP's still-meager budget and generally limited resources, doing so would require help. Taking another “calculated risk,” Rabinovitz approached Jonathan Michaelson, chair of the IU Department of Theatre & Drama, and IU professor and choreographer George Pinney about collaborating on a new musical. Part of the risk lay in the fact that the musical Rabinovitz had in mind, *Kissing Frogs*, consisted of little more than a handful of plot points. Pulling one string after another, Rabinovitz secured noted singer/songwriter and IU alum Jeremy Schonfeld to write the music, and another IU alum, Emmy Award-winning actress Nicole Parker, of *MADtv* fame, to write the book.

Although getting the production ready for its February 2011 debut required lots of last-minute wrangling, including sets designed and new songs written virtually on the fly, *Kissing Frogs* finally came together and sold out its three-week run, becoming the best-attended show in BPP's history. It was a personal triumph for Rabinovitz, who directed, and a coup for BPP in that it significantly strengthened its relationship with IU.

“It was a very big deal for our musical theater students to work with people like Jeremy and Nicole,” says Pinney, who choreographed *Kissing Frogs*. “And it was a win for Jeremy, Nicole, and the producers, who got to have the show fully realized before trying to take it to New York. It takes a very talented artistic director to pull all those resources together and get people on board, and in that sense Chad is absolutely brilliant. His excitement is contagious, like a little bonfire that's grown into a forest fire.”



**The Most Collaborative Man in Town**

Improving BPP’s product on the stage paved the way for Rabinovitz and Gloden to reach out to other potential collaborators and to sponsors. One that Rabinovitz particularly coveted was Ivy Tech Community College, which had recently taken over management of the John Waldron Arts Center in downtown Bloomington.

“When we met, the first thing Chad said to me was, ‘I’m the most collaborative man in town,’” says Paul Daily, artistic director of the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center. “So I thought I’d take him up on that and see what would happen.”

What happened—after a series of meetings with Daily, The Center for Lifelong Learning’s Assistant Director Jeffery Allen, and, ultimately, Ivy Tech Bloomington Chancellor John Whitehart—was a wide-ranging, mutually beneficial relationship between BPP and Ivy Tech. From the beginning, Rabinovitz says, it was important that BPP not be a passive recipient of Ivy Tech’s support but rather an active partner. “My approach is that if I’m going to ask people for money, I want to make them see how it benefits them and not only us. I try to make a pitch they simply can’t refuse.”

So far, the BPP-Ivy Tech partnership has focused on education, with Ivy Tech helping to enhance BPP’s many youth-oriented camps and after-school programs, including DramatiCATS (a two-week playwriting camp), Youth Musical Theatre Ensemble (which in 2012 will write and perform an original musical), Broadway Kids (an introduction to acting and storytelling), Girls Camp of Rock (where girls get to embrace their inner rock stars), MiniPlay Camp (where local students produce and perform short plays written by fellow students), After School EdVentures (in-school drama classes for elementary school students), and The Magic of Make Believe (puppet storytelling for kids ages 3 to 5).

“It’s a win-win for both organizations,” says Allen, who is working with Rabinovitz and Gloden on making the MiniPlay writing competition a core part of the Monroe County Community School Corporation curriculum. “We now offer our students a broader arts curriculum, including theater and drama, and BPP has access to our professional development staff and program-strengthening tools.”

For Gloden, the Ivy Tech partnership is also valuable for “opening doors that were previously closed” and paving the way for sponsor relationships with *Bloom Magazine*, Oliver Winery, World Arts Printing Inc., Holiday Inn, Long’s Landing Furniture, the Indiana Arts Commission, and others. Miah Michaelsen, assistant economic development director for the arts for the city of Bloomington, agrees that BPP’s partnerships have helped bring the organization from the margins to the mainstream of Bloomington’s cultural life.



**Playwright Amanda Rogers came from Los Angeles to help with the inaugural production of her play *I Am Grock*. Pictured, she and Rabinovitz are an attentive audience at rehearsal.**

“I can’t overstate Chad’s ability to work with businesses, bars, restaurants, you name it,” she says. “For BEAD [Bloomington Entertainment & Arts District] to work, there have to be connections between arts entities and businesses, and Chad and BPP have been great at building those connections.”

BPP has also made a point of partnering with other nonprofits. For example, it rents part of its lobby as gallery space to Stone Belt Arc (a local service organization for people with disabilities), featuring artwork by Stone Belt clients. “It’s extremely exciting for our clients to have their work shown in a downtown gallery,” says Stone Belt Community Engagement Director Amy Jackson. “And it’s very exciting for two nonprofits with different missions to find ways to collaborate. BPP is really visionary that way.”

**Guerilla Marketing**

One of the biggest challenges facing Rabinovitz and Gloden was how to market new, never-before-seen (and therefore unfamiliar) plays with virtually no marketing budget. One solution has been to advertise without spending money.

“Chad and Gabe have done a remarkable job in terms of creative marketing,” says Randy White, artistic director of Cardinal Stage Company. “The other day I was in Laughing Planet [Café] and saw they had an I Am Grock burrito for sale, and thought, ‘What a great idea.’”

Rabinovitz has pursued similar restaurant-based marketing deals with Scholars Inn Gourmet Café & Wine Bar (where the Kissing Frogs mint martini was the best-selling specialty cocktail the restaurant has ever offered), Darn Good Soup, Runcible Spoon, Sweet Grass Restaurant, and FARMbloomington, to name a few.

“It doesn’t cost them or us a thing, it’s fun, and it’s mutually beneficial,” Rabinovitz says. “When people go to see live theater, they make a night of it, and when I give my curtain talk I always—half jokingly—say that after the show the audience is only allowed to go to restaurants that support us. That gets a laugh and creates a good feeling about how much BPP cares about its partners.”

As for marketing the shows, Rabinovitz realized early on that it was futile to bank too heavily on promoting individual, unfamiliar titles. “If I go see a movie, I’ve already seen a two-minute trailer, I know Tom Hanks is in it and Spielberg is directing, and I already know I like those guys and I’ll probably like the movie,” Rabinovitz says. “But if I go see a new play at BPP, which is a bit more expensive than a movie, it’s a bigger risk. It’s my job to minimize that risk.”

To that end, Rabinovitz and Gloden have focused on promoting “slots.” For example, *I Am Grock* was promoted as the Reva Shiner Comedy Award winner, and *Three Views of the Same Object* (premiering this April) is the recipient of the Woodward/Newman Drama Award—a prize sponsored by Newman’s Own Foundation and made possible by Rabinovitz’s relationship with Joanne Wood-

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—Chad Rabinovitz

**Emily Goodson, Austin Rawlings, Frank Buczolic, Margot Morgan, and Kate Braun in *I Am Grock*. The play won BPP’s Reva Shiner Comedy Award, selected from hundreds of entries worldwide.**



**Kate Braun in *I Am Grock*.**



**Nan Macy in *I Am Grock*.**





**OPPOSITE:**  
Gloden and Rabinovitz in BPP's newly renovated lobby.

**TOP:**  
BPP patrons mingle prior to another sold-out BPP show.

**LEFT:**  
The lobby before renovation. *Photo by Ashley Athey*

**RIGHT:**  
Actress Emily Goodson has seen BPP go from near-empty houses to sold-out productions.

#### Celebrating the Present & Looking Ahead

Today, BPP is debt free, the quality of the productions has never been better, and locally debuted plays are being published and distributed widely. In two short years, the formerly fringe theater with a bit of a punk-rock aesthetic has become a cultural mainstay, attracting ever-larger audiences and generating national buzz.

"I used to have to buy tickets for my friends to get them to come see me in shows," Goodson says. "Now, I'm acting in sold-out productions that people all over town are talking about. It's amazing."

Virtually everyone involved with BPP, from sponsors to actors to patrons, credit Rabinovitz with turning the organization around, praising him as a visionary artistic director, savvy businessman, and inspirational leader. For his part, Rabinovitz sees BPP's success as a testament to Bloomington's desire for and willingness to support something new.

"Most towns have theaters, but BPP is unique in focusing exclusively on new plays, and it says a lot about

ward. Other promoted slots include the Major Playwrights Series—with new works by such Hollywood notables as actors Jesse Eisenberg (of *The Social Network* movie fame) and Jeff Daniels—and what Rabinovitz calls Bloomington-Before-Broadway, featuring "soon-to-be hit musicals."

In the interest of simply getting more people in the theater, Rabinovitz instituted two innovative ticket initiatives: "Artistic Fulfillment Guarantee," offering theatergoers a free ticket to another show in case they didn't enjoy the show they paid to see; and "Subscribe It Forward," a program allowing returning season subscribers to gift a free subscription to a friend. The result has been a tripling of BPP's subscriber base.

"My approach is that people don't necessarily know what they want to see, and that it's my job to help show them what they want," Rabinovitz says. "Now, instead of risking time and money on a show they know nothing about, people can come with clearer expectations to see an award-winning comedy or drama, or one of our other 'slots.' And if they don't like it, they can see another show for free. If they do, they can invite a friend next time. Simple as that. I try to make it easier for our customers to say yes."

#### Changing Perceptions Outside and In

Forging partnerships and resuscitating BPP's marketing efforts were significant triumphs. But Rabinovitz and Gloden were

still faced with the troubling fact that their building's lobby and theater had all the ambience of a neglected bomb shelter.

"We used to joke that it was some sort of secret hidden place being filmed by the government," says longtime patron Dave Moeller. For many BPP actors, productions felt like putting on shows in a friend's basement.

And so, despite lacking funds, Rabinovitz and Gloden launched an ambitious campaign to completely remodel BPP's lobby and theater. "Chad's strategy was to have a very real, exciting ground plan to show what the space could be," Gloden says. "When we started asking the right people for the right amount of money, we were able to show them plans for an artist's loft, a new art gallery, and a lobby interior that would give the theater a completely new, cosmopolitan atmosphere." Rabinovitz's vision was both appealing and contagious. Before long, BPP had raised \$75,000 in grants and private donations—enough to begin a significant renovation.

Today, the lobby and theater have been almost completely transformed, the former dungeon-like trappings replaced by a sophisticated, modern décor. "It's simply more professional," says BPP veteran Goodson. "As an actor, I take my job more seriously when I see that BPP is going the extra mile and putting resources into creating a better product."

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—Emily Goodson