

# Connecting Different Worlds

Bari Hochwald uses theater to open hearts and minds

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**On a recent dreary, drizzly night, Bari Hochwald** sat in the first row at Strand Theater Co. on Harford Road in Baltimore and watched a troupe of mostly young women actors rehearse for the current production of “Count Down,” which Hochwald is directing. A longtime actor and director, Hochwald, 53, has worked on television, film and theatrical projects across the country and internationally. But the New Jersey native and Baltimore transplant is also a passionate social-activist artist whose goal is making our fractured, contentious world closer to whole through the theater.



To that end, Hochwald has chosen Baltimore as the world headquarters for The Global Theatre Project — the organization she founded in Los Angeles in 2010 that uses the arts to stimulate connection and empathy within and across cultures and communities.

The GTP, which grew out of the Florence International Theatre Company that Hochwald co-founded in 2005 when she lived in Florence, Italy, produces plays and other theatrical and arts projects that address social issues while, by design, involving the community.

For instance, “Belarusian Dream Theater” involved productions in Los Angeles and Florence that included a performance, film and discussion bringing attention to human rights violations in Belarus. Other projects have addressed violence against women, immigration and silencing the press.

Hochwald, who moved to Baltimore around the time that Freddie Gray died in April 2015, has a deep belief that every social problem can be diminished or eliminated if people appreciate and empathize with people and communities they don’t know, understand or even revile.

If we don’t care about each other, if we don’t recognize the majesty of one another, if we don’t experience each other, it’s done. — *Bari Hochwald*

“My thoughts have to do with global citizenry and how to create a peaceful world that acknowledges that it’s not peaceful. It acknowledges the crimes that we are doing to each other — consciously and unconsciously. And that until those are seen and explored, how are we going to heal?”

Hochwald said. “It’s so easy to see ‘the other’ as a group. There’s an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ — and if you create something together on an issue that links you, that allows you to understand your commonality, then you can’t ever look at someone from that group again and say ‘them.’ It’s impossible.”

So, Hochwald is focusing her creative talents on writing, producing and directing work that attacks social ills head-on and involves various groups

in the production to reach that goal of sparking empathy and understanding.

Last year, she produced events in Baltimore that explored the global immigrant and refugee crises in “An Explorer’s Desire” at the Jewish Museum of Maryland and the struggles of women rabbis in “Stories from the Fringe: Women Rabbis, Revealed!” performed at the Gordon Center for Performing Arts.

“Bari had proposed this project to us and first made contact with the Gordon Center,” said Elena Kostakis, executive director of The Strand Theater Co. “We rehearsed it here and presented it there. It was sold out and had a wonderful reception and the perfect audience for it.”

After the performance, there was a panel with area female rabbis who talked about how difficult it was to be a female rabbi in a male-dominated field. And, 20 years later, there are many more.

“Bari is a consummate professional. For a small theater with a shoestring budget that’s still trying to get its bearings, having such quality artists, such highly professional artists, is a gift,” Kostakis said.

Hochwald credits her Reform Jewish background with helping open her up to the arts and to the world.

“In terms of Jewish identity, my parents brought me up to use my eyes and my mind and to express myself. And to appreciate art and to read and be curious and to understand what it is to be a part of a community,” Hochwald said. “We’re part of the whole. But that that did not mean to the exclusion of all others.”

## **A Life in Theater**

Hochwald knew by junior high school that she wanted to dedicate her life to the theater. Her family in Holmdel, N.J., both patronized and participated in theater.

“My parents and I used to do community theater together,” Hochwald said of the start of her acting career. “And on Christmas break we would go see five Broadway shows, so there was a lot of appreciation of theater in my household.”



HOCHWALD WORKING WITH THE CAST OF “COUNT DOWN,” WHICH SHE IS DIRECTING AT THE STRAND THEATER CO.

She attended summer school at Carnegie Mellon University between her sophomore and junior years in high school, an experience that changed her life.

“That summer, there was a moment where I was doing a relaxation exercise, which I remember was outdoors and we were in the grass,” Hochwald said. “Suddenly, I saw the world and life so clearly and so differently, and I thought, I have to help other people experience this. What a miracle we are. How joyous it all is. How interesting. How fascinating.” “And at that point I interpreted that to mean through my acting,” she added, “because that’s what I had.”

It was natural, then, for her to leave high school a year early to pursue acting at Syracuse University, where she received a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1985. There, she studied with an acting teacher named Arthur Storch, whose influence has persisted.

“Arthur was of that old school, he taught me about the detail of exploring humanity and my obligation to that,” Hochwald said.

Another creative influence that changed her understanding of theater was Sam Shepard’s play “Tooth of Crime,” which was performed at a regional theater while she attended Syracuse.

“It was a very affronting piece and it was probably what ended up pushing me toward the graduate school that I went to in the end. Because it was so stylized,” she said.

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But grad school would come later. Hochwald’s first acting job out of college was in Roanoke, Va., and a role from which one might perhaps draw parallels to the future theme and mission of her life as a theater artist. The play was “The Miracle Worker” and Hochwald portrayed Annie Sullivan, the gritty and determined teacher who helped a young, blind and deaf Helen Keller learn how to communicate — in essence how to see and understand the world.

“I loved that role. That was an amazing role,” Hochwald remembered. “It was a great production. And then I pieced together my life, like everybody does.”

That piecing together included living in New York and starting a theater company with Syracuse friends, including Aaron Sorkin who was developing the play “A Few Good Men.” She acted and took jobs to pay the bills that ranged from working in a bakery, for a safari company and for cosmetic giant Almay. Then she was accepted at American Repertory Theater Institute at Harvard University, and took classes with world-renowned directors and actors, which took her acting to a new level.

A move to Hollywood came after a painful breakup, and Hochwald stayed and worked in Los Angeles for a dozen years, landing roles in familiar and popular television shows including “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman,” “Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,” “Judging Amy,” “Star Trek: Enterprise,” “The

Practice,” “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,” “NYPD Blue” and “Desperate Housewives.”

But it was her involvement with a Los Angeles theater company and volunteering with a nonprofit youth organization that led her to direct, as she saw the impact of programs that used the arts to create, build and strengthen communities. Hochwald, by then about to turn 40, was searching for something. But she wasn’t sure what.

On a whim, in 2005 she went to Florence, Italy, and decided to stay. She co-founded the Florence International Theatre Company, which produced not only traditional theater and social-issues theater, but also projects that engaged the community through her Creative Campus Global Initiative.

“Basically, that was the seed of the idea of the community engagement. Then we started looking at social issues,” Hochwald said.

But after about five years, Hochwald ran out of money. She returned to Los Angeles in 2010.

### **The Global Theatre Project**

She expected to return to a changed America. After all, the country was recovering from an economic crisis and had elected its first black president. But she found the country hadn’t changed in the ways she expected.

“I came back and saw that Americans hadn’t been touched at all by what was going on in the world,” she said. “I thought, I can’t talk anymore about wanting to do theater in Florence. I have to talk about waking up. So that shaped the mission of the Global Theatre Project.”

Founded in 2011 in Los Angeles, GTP’s inaugural event was “Belarusian Dream Theater.” Other projects linked Los Angeles with Florence or Stratford, England, to explore questions such as what it means to be American and what it means to be a part of the world. And then, in 2014, while visiting Baltimore with her Italian boyfriend, he suggested the two move here.



“As much as there was enthusiasm for the GTP in Los Angeles, my instinct was that the conversation that I wanted to have would be better understood and more impactful on the East Coast,” Hochwald said.

And even though she didn’t know the Baltimore theater scene, she came, bringing with her the Global Theatre Project and her vision of making a better world. Arriving soon after the turmoil surrounding the death of Freddie Gray, the first arts meeting she attended, Artparthied, illustrated the city’s passion and frustration, and she wondered what she had to offer

the Baltimore arts community. She decided to spend the next year listening.

Her first Baltimore GTP piece was mounted in 2017 at the Jewish Museum of Maryland. Based on a Los Angeles/Florence collaboration, “An Explorer’s Desire” addressed immigration. She restructured the play to be set in Baltimore as a Passover seder.

“The seder is obviously a migration story and the Haggadah takes you through a step-by-step process that has moments for self-contemplation, for listening, for exploring issues together,” she said. “That’s the long-term goal, communal discussion and activism.”

As part of a personal protest, she began wearing a silver Star of David pendant the day Donald Trump was elected president because of the spate of attacks on Muslims and immigrants.

“With our history, no Jew could allow what’s going on and not respond to it,” she said. “And I wanted to be identified as one of these groups that have a history of necessary migration, many of whom were turned away and died.”

Clelia Marmugi, liaison and director of public relations for The Global Theatre Project in Florence, met Hochwald after watching her performance in a play there, which she described as a “a desperately needed breath of fresh air in an old Renaissance city like Florence.” She was interested immediately in collaborating on Hochwald’s vision for GTP.

“Bari’s projects follow a proven methodology that promotes dialogue and creativity, encouraging personal and community growth,” Marmugi said. “I saw it happen in Florence. I can see it happening in the U.S. or in any part of the world because it is a global approach that can be applied worldwide.”



## Spreading the Vision



For Hochwald, the vision of changing the world through theater must be replicable and self-perpetuating, so she reproduces outreach projects in cities around the world. To that end, she's sought out those with similar missions and found Mack McCarter, a Shreveport, Louisiana, native who founded the nonprofit Community Renewal International (CRI) in 1994.

“Our entire theory is based upon intentionally and systematically reconnecting people based on their commonality,” McCarter said. “And we feel like the largest commonality, and the most important, is our capacity to care for one another. No matter who we are.”

In McCarter and CRI, Hochwald saw a working template of how an organization can train activists to live and work in communities and help stabilize, strengthen and improve those communities, then create new activists to go on to other communities. And McCarter was intrigued by having a partnership with an arts focus.

“We must address the whole person. It’s very simplistic, but you’re not going to have a better society without better people,” McCarter said. “It has always been my intention to begin to bring in both visual as well as the performing arts into neighborhoods. And here was an incredible paradigm that Bari had using Creative Corps. We provide a port for Bari’s work to be able to come in, because we actually train persons and send them to live in high-crime, high-poverty areas, and so they become leavening agents, building the relationships of trust.”

Through the GTP Institute, student activists will take classes and plan projects in Florence and become part of the Creative Corps that goes into cities like Baltimore and Shreveport and others, implementing projects and building community.

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“I studied [McCarter’s] program, I’ve been to Shreveport five or six times. His work is extremely unique. And I’m trying to get it into Baltimore,” Hochwald said. “He doesn’t have a not-for-profit that goes in and fixes things. He has a not-for-profit that teaches people how to grow healthy communities. That has been going on for 23 years in Shreveport very successfully and in other places as well.”

And while some may think that Hochwald’s and McCarter’s visions make them starry-eyed idealists, well, Hochwald accepts that, because she feels empathy and understanding is the only way out of our current divided world.

“Whether you’re talking about gun control, or you’re talking about human trafficking or inner-city violence or drugs, if we don’t care about each other, if we don’t recognize the majesty of one another, if we don’t experience each other, it’s done,” Hochwald said. “So, the only solution is to start being courageous and moving toward one another and asking questions and having empathetic discussion and listening and sharing and creating and saying, *This is what we envision*.”