

EVERYTHING ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT FROM THE SEACOAST TO THE TRI-CITY REGION

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# Keeping score

SEACOAST COMPOSER RANDY ARMSTRONG WRITES ORIGINAL SCORE FOR THRESHOLD STAGE PRODUCTION, PAGE 3



## COVER STORY



From left: Maria Mendes Hendricks, Randy Armstrong, Johanna Carlisle-Zepeda, Chris Curtis, Nancy Oarneire Graham and Heather Glenn Wixson rehearse for "The Clean House" that opens April 13 at Star Theatre in Kittery. [COURTESY PHOTO/PATRICK DOROW]

# Words and music

**Randy Armstrong composes original score for Threshold Stage Company production of 'The Clean House'**

**By Jeanné McCartin**

Threshold Stage Company took a chance twice while assembling its "The Clean House" team, and it paid off. Big.

The play by Sarah Ruhl, a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is a favorite of co-Founding Artistic

Director Heather Glenn Wixson, who introduced partner Peter Motson to the work. It was among a select few plays set aside by the pair "til we think it's the right time," Glenn Wixson says.

"We just did 'Long Day's Journey (Into Night)' and so we knew we were looking for a comedy," Glenn Wixson says. "But, we wanted it to be smart; a smart, socially relevant, human comedy, and 'The Clean House' rose to the top."

The next big question

### Go & Do

**What:** "The Clean House"

**Where:** STAR Theatre, Kittery Community Center, 120 Rogers Road, Kittery, Maine

**When:** April 13 to 29; April 13, 14, 20, 21, 27 and 28 at 8 p.m.; April 22, 28 and 29 will be at 3 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$25

**More info:** [kitterycommunity-center.org/star-theatre](http://kitterycommunity-center.org/star-theatre) or call (207) 439-3800

after play selection is who directs, she says.

Glenn Wixson had met A.

Nora Long, the Associate Artistic Director of Lyric Stage Company, Boston, Mass., while working a show at Hackmatack Playhouse. "Quite frankly she was one of the best directors I've ever worked with," Glenn Wixson says.

Asking her was a long shot given the director's busy schedule, but they opted to try.

"I nervously contacted her, knowing she'd be busy, and perhaps not willing, because it was in Kittery,"

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## COVER STORY

### COVER

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Glenn Wixon says. "When I contacted her, we talked a lot about theater, goals and the play, and she was very interested. And, it was just by luck she had the time to do this. We were thrilled beyond thrilled."

The project marks Long's third on the Seacoast, both earlier local directing jobs were at Hackmatack.

"Heather had already impressed me with her artistry and creative voice when we had worked together previously, so when she told me about Threshold and what she and Peter were working to do, I would have considered directing the phone book for them," Long says. "But then, she offered me this beautiful play by one of my favorite writers – how could I say no?"

Then there's working in an "extraordinary theater community," Long adds. So, she signed on.

One of the early conversations between the co-artistic directors and Long was regarding the script's reference to music. The pair was interested in commissioning an original score. Long expressed a preference for live performers.

"Clean House's" mix of caucasian New England and South American characters suggested world fusion music to Motson and Glenn Wixon, which brought Randy Armstrong to mind.

"The thought was to commission him to compose original music. ... But again we thought, no way such an accomplished, busy musician would do it," Glenn Wixon says. "But then we thought, there is no harm in asking."

They shared ideas and discussed the process with Armstrong, who agreed to read the script.

The musician was immediately struck and intrigued by the Brazilian and Argentinian lead characters.

"I started thinking South American music," Armstrong says. "It excited me to think Samba,



Director A. Nora Long works with composer Randy Armstrong who wrote an original score for Threshold Stage Company's production of "The Clean House," which opens Friday, April 13. [COURTESY PHOTOS/PATRICK DOROW]



From left: Randy Armstrong, Johanna Carlisle-Zepeda and Chris Curtis rehearse for "The Clean House."

Bossa nova, Brazilian and using a nylon string guitar and classical."

He was sold. "We started off thinking it might be just a recorded score," he says. "But as the excitement grew, Peter said, 'If we can get a percussionist to perform with you, let's try to do it live.'"

Armstrong recruited two to cover the run: Theo Martey, from Ghana, handles the first and last weekend. Marty Quinn, Armstrong's longtime associate, takes the middle week.

Armstrong has a lengthy resume. He co-founded Do'a World Music Ensemble, Unu Mondo and Beyond Borders. He has performed throughout the

United States, and worldwide, and appears on more than 45 albums, theater and film scores. He is a recipient of numerous grants from the National Endowment on the Arts and the New England Foundation for the Arts. Armstrong has composed for television, theater and dance productions, the most recent "Shelter" by Catherine Stewart and Neoteric Dance Collaborative, Artistic Director Sarah Duclous. Armstrong's most recent CD "Beyond Borders," features both Martey and Quinn.

"The Clean House" is a comic drama, a non-musical, that tells the story of five disparate characters. It's a mix of fantasy and

reality.

"The characters routinely, directly, address the audience – not unlike a Shakespeare soliloquy – and tell us stories from their imagination," Long says.

Lane, a wealthy doctor from Connecticut, hires Matilda as her maid. The latter, a Brazilian, took the position to escape the pain of loss, which makes her thoroughly ineffectual in her role.

Lane's ultra-neat sister Virginia starts cleaning for Matilda while Lane is at work.

Meanwhile Lane's husband Charles has an affair with Ana, an Argentinian, and his elder. When the two lovers come to apologies to Lane, Ana hires Matilde, who Lane just fired.

It doesn't get any less quixotic nor complex. There's serious illness, a trip to Alaska in search of a cure, deep compassion, the one great joke, and loss.

"At its heart, I think the play is asking what are the limits of love, are there limits, all framed around one woman's search for the perfect joke," Long says. "Ruhl's ability to straddle comedy, tragedy, romance effortlessly is a joy to watch and work on."

For his part, Armstrong created a leitmotif for each character.

Both Ana and Matilde are

paired with South American tunes. For sisters Lane and Virginia, it's more classical.

"They have very different personalities, but they are very close as sisters," Armstrong says. "And so it's a matter of creating the emotional quality of the scene based on what their dialogue is."

Charles' trip to Alaska is an audible departure, "when I'll play a Lakota drone flute," Armstrong says. "Some of it is tragic, some funny, some is a little crazy. But it is all of those things."

Armstrong also made an arrangement of a favorite tune (a surprise, he says) sung as a duet between Ana and Charles.

"Randy is such an extraordinary musician. His ability to build worlds is such a gift and I think will be part of what makes this production really special," Lane says. "... He has composed and arranged some beautiful music that really suits the journey of the play."

After talking with Long "to make sure we were on the same page," he hit the studio. Things moved fast with each song finished in 15 minutes or less.

"I just closed my eyes to think about it and it came out. I presented it and it seemed to work, actually it DID work," Armstrong says. "Of course, the recording was more than 15 minutes for sure, because I layered all the parts."

During rehearsal, the cast – Glenn Wixon, as Lane; Maria Mendes Hendricks as Matilda; Nancy Oarneire Graham as Virginia; Johanna Carlisle-Zepeda as Ana, and Chris Curtis as Charles – worked with his recording.

Threshold selected this intriguing play for numerous reasons, Glenn Wixon says. There is the mix of cultures, relatable, albeit somewhat stereotypical characters, and an interesting, broad variety of female roles.

"It is such a great play, one of my favorite of all time. Oh gawd, there's so much to it that is beyond what I can articulate," Glenn Wixon says. "Through the course of the play – for all the characters – you come to understand their humanity and individuality, way beyond the stereotype."