

ARTS

Never Boring: Rorschach Theatre Knows the Bigger the Risk, the Bigger the Payoff

In its 25th season, Rorschach Theatre, known for visceral productions of thought-provoking plays in found spaces, is going strong as contemporaries have shuttered.



by **CHAD DEXTER KINSMAN**

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Rorschach Theatre cofounders and co-artistic directors Randy Baker and Jenny McConnell Frederick; Credit: Darrow Montgomery

Why did the **Devil** break into the church? To turn on the lightboard. Don't believe me? Ask anyone involved in Rorschach Theatre's 2003 production of *The Master and Margarita*. When the sexton never arrived to open the sanctuary doors, the Prince of Darkness took matters into his own claws. The church in question was the now-derelict Calvary Casa United Methodist Church in Columbia Heights. The Devil was, of course, a character played by company member **Tim Getman**. He may or may not have needed an arc welder to get in.

This fiendish break-in is just one of hundreds of beguiling moments in Rorschach's 25-year history. Founded in 1999 by a group of 20-something Gen X artists interested in putting a new spin on theater making, the company is known for creating visceral productions of thought-provoking plays in "found spaces"—locations they had to transform into performance venues through imagination and grit. Two and half decades later, "expected" and "easy" have never been part of Rorschach's plans or mission.

"What did we know 25 years ago?" **Randy Baker**, 49, says from a chair in the company's current home, a former Rochester Big & Tall store on Connecticut Avenue NW. "We were just a bunch of friends getting together to make theater." One of those friends, Baker's co-artistic director and fellow founder, **Jenny McConnell Frederick**, 47, sits behind a laptop nearby, preparing for the night's rehearsal. "But what's actually funny is we continue to aspire to a lot of the early, lofty goals we set in our early 20s," says Baker.

When Baker and McConnell Frederick moved to D.C. in 1997 (the latter having grown up in Northern Virginia, the former mostly overseas), they quickly discovered their options for working in theater were "limited to musicals, Shakespeare, and garden variety dramas and comedies," according to McConnell Frederick. Hungry for darker, wilder, and more challenging productions, the two new friends (along with designer **Jordana Adelman** and director **Jason Gots**) launched Rorschach Theatre in July 1999 with a production of **Eugene O'Neill's** expressionistic classic *The Hairy Ape*. The program's opening line simply stated: "People are bored."

To create the play's clanking, claustrophobic setting—a ship's coal rooms—the company crammed actors and audiences side-by-side on the stage of Edlavitch DC Jewish Community Center's Theater J (where Baker and McConnell Frederick worked at the time). In her [review](#) for *City Paper*, **Jessica Dawson** dryly advised bringing a raincoat to protect from the actors' sweat.

"The best work Rorschach does is when it's transforming a found space," shares **Scott McCormick**, who has appeared in 14 shows with the company, and previously ran its marketing and communications. Although his last show was in 2015, he's still affiliated with Rorschach. "This is why we're different from everybody else."



Rorschach founders Jordana Adelman (left), Jason Gots, McConnell Frederick, and Baker in July 1999; courtesy of Rorschach

Looking through the list of Rorschach's past performance spaces is like peeling back layers of D.C.'s 21st-century development: Dupont's EDCJCC, just two years after being **shut for nearly three decades**; the Millennium Arts Center (today's Rubell Museum in Southwest); a greenhouse at a former home improvement store that is now home to Tenleytown's Target; a pre-Civil War stable turned art gallery in Blagden Alley when the area was still a low-rent haven for artists; Calvary Baptist Church in the "pre-Target" Columbia Heights, says McConnell Frederick, who remembers only being able to suggest 7-Eleven for a preshow bite because of the lack of options). Rorschach also did stints at the performing arts centers at Georgetown University and H Street's Atlas Performing Arts Center, as well as the Great Lawn at Walter Reed, less than a year after the space opened to the public in late 2020. Today it's situated in that aforementioned former retail storefront in the Golden Triangle neighborhood.

The choice to transform spaces rather than find existing theaters came from "a lack of resources and the freedom to not be confined by what was normal," says McConnell Frederick. While she admits to

occasionally considering a permanent home, she saw the difficulties of finding, renovating, and maintaining a venue when she worked for Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company during their search in the early 2000s.

That freedom proved fruitful in other measures of success as well. Most of Rorschach's contemporaries did not survive long enough to find such hard-won stability. In a [Post article from 2000](#), writer **Lloyd Rose** surveys the field of small D.C. theaters at the turn of the millennium. Of the nine companies profiled, only Rorschach remains. Many others have come and gone over the same quarter century.

Baker and McConnell Frederick attribute Rorschach's durability, in part, to their shared leadership model. "If either one of us had been the only leader, it would have been easier to find a point in life where it became too much," says McConnell Frederick. "We've been able to have a balance, live our lives. Randy went to graduate school. I had a kid. Whether for the practical purposes of accomplishing things or for mental health reasons, having a partner has really added to our longevity."

That's not to say the duo don't have their share of disagreements, but they have developed their way of working together. "People sometimes think good collaboration is always agreeing," Baker says. "But the challenging of each other often breeds not just compromise but also new ideas. I have this idea. You have this idea. Maybe neither of us is right. Maybe it's the third idea."

Myth, magic, and mayhem are frequent elements in Rorschach's repertoire. European avant-garde plays mix with stage adaptations of classic novels and [beloved B-movies](#). The company also regularly produces works by a diverse cadre of contemporary writers, including **Tony Kushner, Sheila Callaghan, Qui Nguyen, Neil Gaiman, José Rivera, and Alexandra Petri**. **Steve Yockey**, best known for developing the HBO Max series *The Flight Attendant*, contributed to the company's current Psychogeographies Project, a narrativized self-tour of D.C.'s hidden history told through monthly chapters mailed to participants. Its latest installment, the cultish and cryptozoological [Eldritch Investigations](#), is available now.

"The script needs to surprise you," Baker says, explaining how the artistic directors select projects. "The story can't be entirely expected."

"We don't want you to see the ending coming," adds McConnell Frederick. "You read enough scripts, it becomes harder and harder to find ones that surprise. But they're still out there."

Getting scripts that offer those surprises often present another challenge that Rorschach has come to expect: "The playwrights Rorschach gravitates toward always write one impossible thing into their script that we have to figure out how we're going to stage," says McCormick.



In October 2023, Rorschach Theatre staged a remake of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in the former Rochester Big & Tall on Connecticut Avenue NW. Pictured: Mollie Greenberg as Barbara; Credit: DJ Corey Photography

Part of Rorschach's allure has been their ability to stage those "impossible" moments with relatively shallow pockets. Early on, budgets were "scant," to use McConnell Frederick's word. While outside artists were paid, the company's leaders and company members volunteered their time, usually while holding full time jobs at other theaters. Props and other scenic elements were begged, built, borrowed, or found. Everyone pitched in onstage, backstage, and front-of-house.

“In many ways, we turned that scarcity mentality into an asset,” says McConnell Frederick. “We empowered ourselves to think a little bit differently because we were unable to go to a store to buy something.”

Such resourcefulness led critics to praise the company for regularly whipping up theatrical magic. In her *Washington Post* review of the company’s 2001 production of *The Illusion*, **Dolores Whiskeyman** called the production “an inspired work—proof that limited resources do not stymie great talents, any more than big budgets can squeeze works of genius from mediocre minds.”

That’s not to say there weren’t missteps—productions that drew negative reviews or kept patrons away. But the company knows they cannot achieve success by ensuring against failure. “Rorschach takes a risk on every play we do, with the idea that we’re going to find an audience,” McCormick says. “If we don’t find an audience for it, we’re going to go through some lean times. But every now and then we’re going to make a hit. I think to myself, how boring it is not to take a risk.”

Through busts and booms, the company’s financial picture has improved over time. Company members began drawing pay in the mid-2000s, though today Rorschach does not have a standing company. Each production is individually staffed. More recently, Baker and McConnell Frederick were able to fulfill another of their early aspirations—working at Rorschach, and only Rorschach, full time. “I went full time in 2018, and Randy in 2022,” says McConnell Frederick. They are joined by a full-time general manager **John Ralls** and a part-time production manager, **Germar Townsend**.

With more resources, the company has expanded the scope of their work while keeping true to their founding vision of intimate and immediate theater. Last summer’s hit *Angel Number Nine*, following the trials of an indie band on tour, seated the audience in a meticulously crafted two-level dive bar (complete with drinks and merch for sale), while the story and original musical numbers, written by **Shawn Northrip**, happened all around them. The space also featured listening booths with playlists curated by local music mavens and an exhibit covering the sounds of D.C., from hardcore to go-go.



The cast of *Angel Number Nine*, staged in former retail shop, complete with a working bar; Ryan Maxwell Photography

“Now that we have a little more stability, we sometimes have to remind each other we don’t have to scavenge,” McConnell Frederick says.

Now among the city’s seasoned theater professionals, McConnell Frederick and Baker are working to provide opportunities for the next generation of disruptive artists. Rorschach’s annual [Klecksography](#) initiative commissions early and emerging artists of all ages to create and stage new works based on visual art in just 10 days. The event both helps Rorschach stock its own roster of possible collaborators and exposes new local talent to representatives of other area theaters. Applications for the 2024 installment, which will take place in early February, closed in December.

When asked about Rorschach’s next 25 years, McConnell Frederick says: “Thinking forward, it’s hard to say what’s going to come. It’s not that we’re not strategic, but we’re nimble enough to follow our instincts and explore an opportunity when it strikes. We are unafraid to look into the future and whatever it becomes.”