

ARTISTS REPERTORY THEATRE



By John Biguenet
Directed by Gemma Whelan

October 27 – November 22, 2015
Morrison Stage

Broomstick was first produced in a National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere by New Jersey Repertory Company (Long Branch, NJ), Montana Repertory Theatre (Missoula, MT), and Southern Repertory Theatre (New Orleans, LA) with support from the National New Play Network's Continued Life of New Plays Fund.

CAST

Witch.....Vana O'Brien*^
Understudy to Ms. O'Brien.....Sarah Lucht*^

CREATIVE TEAM

Scenic Designer.....Kristeen Willis Crosser^
Lighting Designer.....Carl Faber**
Costume Designer.....Gregory Pulver^
Composer/Sound Designer.....Rodolfo Ortega^
Dialect Coach.....Mary McDonald-Lewis^
Properties Master.....Amy Katrina Bryan
Hair and Makeup Designer.....Ashley Hardy
Fiber Artist.....K. Franklin Porter

STAGE MANAGEMENT & CREW

Resident Production Stage Manager.....Carol Ann Wohlmut*
Production Assistant.....Jessica Evans Irvine
Board Op.....Jason Coffey

* Member of Actors Equity Association, the union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States. Actors Equity Association, founded in 1913, represents more than 49,000 actors and stage managers in the U.S. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions, providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans. Equity seeks to foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of our society. www.actorsequity.org

** The lighting designer of *Broomstick* is represented by United Scenic Artists, Local USA 829 of the IATSE.

***Stage Directors and Choreographers Society

^Artists Repertory Theatre Resident Artist

A Message from Artists Rep's Artistic Director, Dámaso Rodriguez

“Who’s that? I hear you in the darkness there.”

–The Witch in John Biguenet’s *Broomstick*

**“...what is she without words? With them she can think,
have ideas, be reached, there’s not a thought or fact in
the world that can’t be hers.”**

– Annie Sullivan in William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*

Thanks for joining us today! We are finishing up our 2015 shows with a pair of plays— one new and one familiar— that represent the wide range of work you can always expect from us at Artists Rep.

On our Morrison Stage, you’ll experience the Northwest premiere of *Broomstick*, an intimate conversation with a mysterious old woman who just may be a witch. John Biguenet’s acclaimed and widely-produced new work is more than seasonal Halloween fare or a solo piece. It’s a complex character study, confessional and storytelling tour-de-force, funny, chilling and ultimately moving. Pay close attention to his artful, subtle use of iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets. To this compelling theatrical potion, add the extraordinary presence of Vana O’Brien— a Portland theatre icon and Artists Rep co-founder— and an unforgettable night of intimate, provocative theatre is served.

Running on our Alder Stage, amidst the year-end holiday rush, is William Gibson’s Tony and Academy Award-winning classic, *The Miracle Worker*. Why stage *The Miracle Worker* in place of Christmas or holiday-related fare? This miraculous and true tale of hope, redemption and triumph is exactly in line with the spirit of the season, while being a story that believers (and non-believers) of any faith can share with loved ones of almost any age. Our production of *The Miracle Worker* features a remarkable cast and creative team of some of Portland’s finest professionals and continues our long-time commitment to staging first-class productions of classics alongside the best new, contemporary writing. I hope you’ll find Gibson’s account of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller as surprisingly fresh as I did while working to tell this inspiring, ever-powerful story.

On behalf of all of us at Artists Rep, I wish you a happy holiday season!

Until next year,

Dámaso Rodriguez

A Note from *Broomstick's* Director, **Gemma Whelan**

“...there comes a time for everyone when what you feared the most when you were young returns to haunt your life in other forms...”

–“Witch” in John Biguenet's *Broomstick*

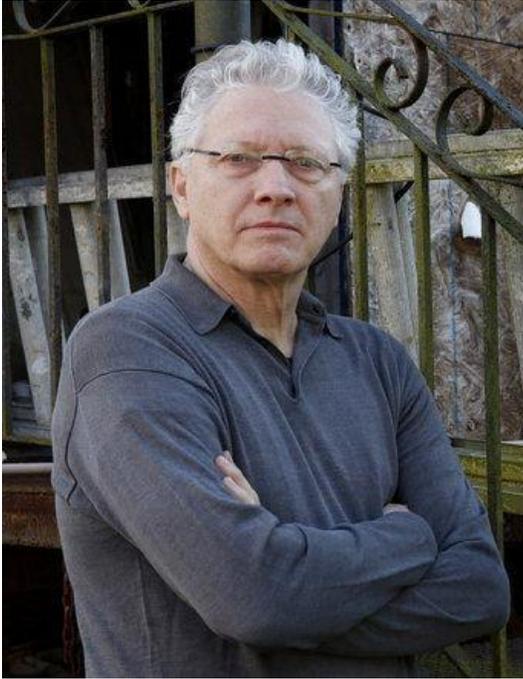
The Witch in *Broomstick* could be a character in a Shakespeare play who conjures up storms by the strength of her passion. She could have sprung from the imagination of the Brothers Grimm. She could be one of the myriad women in history who were drowned or burned at the stake for being too powerful, too close to nature, having some perceived flaw like a wart or a birthmark, or simply for being old.

Our Witch is there as long as people seek her out, as long as people do wrong– lie, cheat, murder– and expect no consequences.

We're so glad you ventured here, to the cottage deep in the dark woods. We're so happy you came to pass some time, or maybe you'll stay on. Your choice of course...



About the Playwright



John Biguenet is an American author, columnist and playwright. His play *The Vulgar Soul* won the 2004 Southern New Plays Festival and was a featured production in 2005 at Southern Rep Theatre; he and the play were profiled in *American Theatre* magazine. *Rising Water* was the winner of the 2006 National New Play Network Commission Award, a 2006 National Showcase of New Plays selection, and a 2007 recipient of an Access to Artistic Excellence development and production grant from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as the 2007 Big Easy Theatre Award for Best Original Play. *Shotgun*, the second play in his *Rising Water* trilogy, premiered in 2009 at Southern Rep Theatre, with subsequent productions at the Orlando Shakespeare Theater and Florida Studio Theatre, both in 2010, and other theaters; it won a 2009 National New Play Network Continued Life of

New Plays Fund Award and was a 2009 recipient of an Access to Artistic Excellence development and production grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. *Shotgun* is published by Dramatists Play Service, Inc. *Mold*, premiering at Southern Rep Theatre in 2013, completed his trilogy of plays about the flooding of New Orleans. The trilogy has had over 25 productions and readings around the country and been the subject of articles in *American Theatre*, *The American Scholar*, and elsewhere; it will be published by Louisiana State University Press in 2015. He was awarded a Marquette Fellowship for the writing of *Night Train*, which he developed on a Studio Attachment at the National Theatre in London and which premiered at New Jersey Rep Company in 2011. After performances at five new-play festivals and reading series, *Broomstick* won a National New Play Network Continued Life of New Plays Fund Award, premiering in an extended run at New Jersey Repertory Company in 2013 and going on to be produced at Montana Repertory Theatre, Southern Rep Theatre, Fountain Theatre (Los Angeles), and Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey in 2014. In 2008, Biguenet was named Theatre Person of the Year at the Big Easy Theatre Awards, the region's major professional theater awards. He received the Louisiana Writer Award, the state's highest literary honor, in 2012.

He has served as a the first guest columnist for *The New York Times* since 2005, when he chronicled Hurricane Katrina from his native New Orleans and detailed the city's reconstruction process. Having served twice as president of the American Literary Translators Association and as writer-in-residence at various universities, he is currently the Robert Hunter Distinguished University Professor at Loyola University in New Orleans.

About the Director



GEMMA WHELAN [Director] Gemma is very happy to return to Artists Rep, where she previously directed the world premiere of *Ithaka* by Andrea Stolowitz. She is the founding Artistic Director of Corrib Theatre. For Corrib she has directed *Little Gem* by Elaine Murphy, *The Hen Night Epiphany* by Jimmy Murphy, *St. Nicholas* by Conor McPherson, and *A Night in November* by Marie Jones (Drammy nomination for Direction, Drammy award for Solo Performance). In Portland she also directed *Words that Burn* by Cindy Williams Gutierrez for Los Porteños at Milagro Theatre, and at Profile, CoHo, Boom Arts, and JAW.

She was the founding Artistic Director of Wilde Irish Productions in the San Francisco Bay Area.

For Wilde Irish: Michael Mac Liammoir's *The Importance of Being Oscar* (Dean Goodman Award for Direction, Dean Goodman Award for Solo Performance), the U.S. premiere of *Ariel* by Marina Carr, Frank McGuinness' *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*, and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Other favorites: Jane Chamber's *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* (Cable Car Nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Directing), and Eileen Atkin's *Vita and Virginia* (Curve Magazine, Best Theatre of the Year Award), both at Theatre Rhinoceros; Tom Kempinski's *Duet for One* (Zephyr Theatre); Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (Phoenix Theatre) and *Equus* by Peter Schaffer (Little Theatre Nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Directing). Gemma received the Gerald Duff Award for Continuing Contribution to Theatre in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Educational credits include Mills College (Chair, Drama Dept), UC Berkeley, American Conservatory Theatre, Berkeley Rep School of Theatre, Portland Actors Conservatory, Portland State University, Literary Arts (Delve), Pacific University, Willamette University, and Ngee Ann Polytechnic (Singapore).

She is an award winning filmmaker and a published novelist. BA Trinity College Dublin, MA Theatre UC Berkeley, MFA Cinema, San Francisco State University. Member SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society). www.gemmawhelan.com

Synopsis

(Caution: Spoilers!)

An old, white-haired woman lives all alone in the Appalachian wilderness with a black cat as her only companion. Her eyes are going, her memories are fleeting, but her nose is as sharp as ever. One night, she smells something strange while making a pot of tea—a visitor.

She knows this guest. He came to her years ago, one of many children she took in. It seems like they're all coming back, now that they're grown. There are questions needing answers and strange memories that need to be explained. She invites him in for a cup of tea but he never says a word. Instead, he lingers just outside her sight, watching her through the twisting branches that make up her house.

Why won't he come inside? They were friends all those years ago, weren't they? He was just a lonely child who ran away from home. His parents had no room for him at home, and who would want to stay with parents who beat their children? She took him in out of the kindness of her heart, fed him sweets and sang him to sleep every night. Why did he even leave at all?

Suddenly, she remembers. One evening, he came downstairs after a nap and saw her chasing something around the oven. The floor was stained red and she was holding a butcher knife. He ran away, too terrified to even think about the woman who took him in—a witch. And that thing she was preparing to cook in her oven—that was a little boy, just like him.

The witch assures him this was not the case. It was just a piglet she was preparing for a casserole, not a child. A tender, sucking piglet, so young and sweet...

And what about the stories she told him, does he even remember those? About an adventurous boy named Jimmy, who traveled the world searching for the girl that he first kissed... Turns out, those stories were mostly true. Jimmy was the witch's childhood sweetheart. He left to see the world when they were still young, but he always swore that he would return for her.

Jimmy never kept his promise. His ship was caught in a terrible storm and there were no survivors. When she got the news, the witch ran off to the hills and screamed her heartbreak at the ocean. Little did she know, her pain was so powerful that the seas churned up another storm. Another ship was caught in the tempest and all of its passengers were lost.

She threw herself into her new powers, determined to master them and never kill by accident again. She could make things right, she could right wrongs that went unnoticed—she could become an avenging angel.

The witch was no stranger to injustice, even at a young age. Living in Appalachia, white supremacy was an ever-present evil. When she was just a girl, she saw her father and neighbors drown three Black men, for supposedly eating a pie and a bowl of fruit. Her father and the men saw it as vigilante justice, a thrill. But the sight of three innocent men sinking into the river has stayed with the witch; a reminder that even people you love can do unforgivable things.

She carries her father's legacy, for better or worse. She has his eloquence, his pride and his violence. From her mother, the witch received her knowledge of charms. Mama was somewhat of a trickster. She would sew charms into the hems of her skirts to make men fall in love with her on the street. A secret power, but a dangerous one.

But her mother wasn't the only trickster in the town. Pretty Jane Jackson, with her golden hair, could pick any man in the street, bat her eyes once and make him her own.

The witch never liked Jane. They were the same age, and each powerful in her own way. When the witch found Jane in bed with her father, her hatred took on a new purpose. Her father was so enraptured, he refused to come home. The witch had to break Jane's control over him.

The next day, Jane's pretty blonde hair falls out. Her teeth are black. The witch's father comes home. And Jane, well... Jane can't bear looking in a mirror and seeing her beauty has disappeared without a trace. A few days later, she was found dead in the well; she must have killed herself. At least, that's what the witch tells the sheriff when he comes around to question her. He would have asked for more details, but a curiously-timed hornet attack puts an end to his questions. So no one figured out what really happened to poor Jane.

But that wasn't the end of her parents' troubles. Her mother was found murdered one day, her ring finger was cut off with the wedding band. Years later, the witch found that finger— ring still attached— hidden behind a mirror in her mother's room. The witch swore she would avenge her mother's murder. And that was the day her father passed away.

Now, the night has grown thick. Shadows flicker on the walls, owls hoot, and everything seems strange and lonely. The witch looks around, searching for her guest, but maybe he isn't even there at all. He never came inside; he never sat and drank the tea she poured him. Her mind won't stop spinning with memories, awful memories of evil things she did. Years ago, or was it last week? But no, she never did anything cruel. Her father, the children she took in— it was all justified, right?

It's too much. She has to get out. She's hungry, and her cauldron is crying out for meat to cook. As for her guest— well, maybe he was never there at all. Maybe she was never there, either. Maybe she's just your guilty conscience, talking to you through a childhood dream.

Real or not, she'll always be there, waiting for you to return.

What Makes a Witch?

By Luan Schooler

Director of New Play Development and Dramaturgy

Throughout recorded history, the belief in witchcraft and fear of witches has held powerful sway in the human psyche. From Old Testament admonitions against sorcery, to fairytales where children are murdered by wicked hags, to *American Horror Story: Coven* that titillates with its brew of sexy horror, our fascination has a long cultural history. Who are the witches? We have two primary resources for understanding them historically: records of the centuries of witch hunts in Europe and America, and fairytales from around the world.

Propelled by Catholics, Protestants, ecclesiastical and secular courts alike, the trials and executions for practicing witchcraft took up to a million lives, mostly in the 16th and 17th centuries. Although men and children were also among the victims, the vast majority were poor women, generally older and disproportionately widows. Published in 1487, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) codified the beliefs of witches and their powers, and also offered guidelines on how they should be interrogated in order to elicit true confessions.



Women, according to the *Malleus*, were credulous, carnal and deceitful beings who could easily succumb to evil. Patriarchal beliefs at the time also meant that women in general were considered mentally, physically and spiritually weak. Strong women with knowledge were an anomaly. Witches were women with secret knowledge, hidden ambitions, dangerous sexuality and access to powerful spells— clearly a threat to society and every man’s soul. Interestingly, the property of accused witches was often awarded to either the accuser or the Church after sentencing – a conflict of interest that wasn’t considered problematic.

The witches of fairy tales have much in common with the women we see persecuted in historical records. They tend to feature old women— ugly hags who live deep in the woods, ready to lure the young and pure to their tasty death. Filled with uncanny knowledge and dread powers, witches choose to live on the fringe where civilization gives way to sinister darkness and chaos. Although there are a few good witches in fairy tales (like Glinda the Good Witch of *The Wizard of Oz*), the vast majority are wicked: cruel, cannibalistic, unlovable and crazed by jealousy.

In *Hansel & Gretel*, the witch's bread and sugar house lures two hungry children into her trap. (It's worth noting that— at the behest of their stepmother— their father took the children deep into the woods and left them to be eaten by beasts. Evil stepmothers and wicked witches are often paired in these tales.) Once inside the witch's home, the girl is forced to do chores while the boy is caged and fattened up so the witch can eat him for dinner. Fortunately, the girl is clever. She tricks the witch into climbing in the oven and rescues her brother while the "old woman was burned up, miserably."

Witches today, especially in Europe and North America, have quite a different character. Generally, they are part of Neo-Pagan or Wiccan spiritual movements that worship pre-Christian gods and goddesses, and endeavor to respect the sacredness of nature. While they do cultivate knowledge and skills to harness the forces of nature through rituals (like casting spells), today's witches are committed to using their talents for healing, community and enhancing the richness of life.

Wicca is an acknowledged religion today, and representatives of the Covenant of the Goddess ("the world's largest religious organization for Neo-Pagan Witches") have participated in the Parliament of the World's Religions since 1993. There, with their colleagues from many other religions, they "seek peace, justice and sustainability, and commit to work for a better world." Rather different from putting little children into the stew!

Scene Study

"Jane Jackson"

WITCH:

I'll tell you how it works where I come from:
temptation bats its eyes, and men succumb.

A girl like Jane sashays all over town
and gets the men to follow her around.
She settles on the one that she likes best,
most likely him who seems the most obsessed.
She sidles up to him out on the street
and whispers when and where she'd like to meet.
Don't matter whether he's got wife and child.
As far as Jane's concerned, he's too beguiled
to think of obligations such as that—
girl's got the morals of an alley cat.
And truth be told, she knows whereof she speaks.
The man shows up, and it goes on for weeks
until at last his daughter tracks them down
to some abandoned shack outside of town
and catches them abed in their love nest.

You'd think her paw, ashamed, would then get dressed
and follow her back home to beg his wife
forgive him what he done. Except in life,
that ain't how things play out. Girl gets a smack
upside her head. "You git, and don't come back,"
her paw tells her. "Ain't none your bus'ness, hear,
what I decide to do."

Jane's got this sneer
across her pretty face as if she's won
and everything between them's said and done.

The daughter, though, she don't go home that night.
She waits beside the path for morning light,
and when her father finally leaves the shack,
she crouches down and hides behind a stack
of firewood until he's good and gone.
She's been awake since yesterday. A yawn
escapes her lips and makes a blue-black crow
up on the roof regard her down below.

But strange to say, it don't let out a caw,
as if it knows the girl that it just saw.
Without a sound, she gathers up some herbs
that grow along the edge of woods, disturbs
a nest of rattlesnakes for something there,
and traps a hooded rat inside a snare.

She lays the things she's gathered on the ground
and makes a kind of paste of what she's found.

She knows too much of it just might prove fatal
so slathers but a dab upon the ladle
that hangs above the bucket on the porch,
the one they use for water when they're parched.

She peeks into the window 'fore she goes.
Jane Jackson's still asleep—without no clothes—
and even though she's come to hate the girl,
she must admit Jane's pretty as a pearl.

At least until Jane wakes and takes a sip
of water from the ladle on whose lip
her lover's daughter rubbed a little paste
of things that leave behind a funny taste.
That night her hair falls out and teeth turn black;
her lover takes one look at her and back
he goes to his own kin again. Poor Jane,
downright distraught, goes crazy from the pain
of looking in a mirror at a face
whose beauty disappeared without a trace.

No wonder that she went and killed herself.
And if she needed someone else's help
to do the thing she prob'ly meant to do,
wern't nothing but a little push or two.

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Discussion Questions

- 1.** The Witch describes her mother hiding charms in her skirts in order to capture men's hearts. Why do you think the Witch hates Jane for seducing men when her mother did the same thing? Why does she blame Jane, who is presumably a teenager, instead of the adult men who abandon their families to be with her?
- 2.** When the Witch curses Jane Jackson, she uses herbs from the edge of the woods, a trapped hooded rat and "something" from a rattlesnake's nest. Spells and curses are often influenced by symbolism. What could the symbolism behind the witch's spell be?
- 3.** While the fairy tales referenced in *Broomstick* are European in origin, the play takes place in American Appalachia. Why do you think the playwright set this play in America? How does American history and culture, especially Southern history and culture, influence how we perceive these fairy tales?
- 4.** The Witch is just a young girl when she sees her father and neighbors murder three Black men who were passing through the town. How does she react to it? How does it impact her when she establishes herself as an avenging angel? How does it relate to her father's death, later in the play?
- 5.** Why do you think the Witch's father killed her mother?
- 6.** The character of the "Visitor" is referenced throughout the play, and the witch speaks to him constantly. Why do you think the playwright chose not to have an actor playing the Visitor onstage with the Witch? What does the play gain or lose by being a one-person play?
- 7.** The play is written in rhyming iambic pentameter (ten syllable lines that follow an unstress-stress rhythm). How does this rhyme and rhythm impact the audience? How does it affect the delivery of jokes and big reveals?
- 8.** The Witch prides herself on acting as a sort of vigilante avenger in her community— she rights wrongs that go unpunished by the legal system. Do you think her vengeance is justified? Why or why not?
- 9.** The play ends on an ethereal note— we never know for sure whether or not the Witch is real, if her guest is real or if she's just a creation of everyone's collective childhood fears and guilty consciences. What is gained by this kind of an ending? What is lost?