



Wendy Knox with her two most loyal fans.

Ain't Behavin'

Frank Theatre artistic director Wendy Knox has been doing things her way for eighteen years, and she isn't about to stop now.

By Jaime Kleiman

Wendy Knox, the founding artistic director of Frank Theatre, has an imposing presence, a booming voice, and stands six feet, two inches tall. Some words that have been used to describe her are *brash, bold, uncompromising, in-your-face, nontraditional, genius, lunatic, leftist, idealist, ambitious, abrasive, difficult, contrary, audacious*. Strong words all, and they seem to follow her everywhere. Since she started her iconoclastic theater company eighteen years ago, the press has been both complimentary and cutting, often in the same article, and sometimes in the same sentence—as in “Frank Theatre’s production of [pick a play] is great . . . if you like that sort of thing.”

The sort of thing Knox likes to put onstage isn't for everyone, certainly, but a Frank show is always interesting. Knox's singular directing style never waivers from her kamikaze agenda: “If I haven't pissed anybody off,” she is fond of saying, “I haven't done my job.” If she hits a wall—or a nerve—she knows something exciting has happened. She and her company (they are inexorably linked) are known for tackling material that most companies are afraid to touch, either because producers think audiences will find it too abstruse or because there's almost zero money-making potential. Knox also likes to put her own distinctive spin on plays that have been done to death, particularly hoary classics such as *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Though Knox is known for speaking her mind, she prefers to let her work speak for itself (and wishes everyone else would too). She knows she's defined by her—pardon the

pun—frankness, and she can sound defensive when asked about her renown as a “difficult” woman. “I’m an old hag,” she says. “I don’t behave, and they don’t know what to do with me.” What few people in the general public know about her is that in addition to her well-deserved reputation as an artistic strongwoman, Knox is also a loving, loyal, good-natured person who laughs readily at herself and has a dedicated following of professional actors, top-tier designers, and enthusiastic volunteers who support her vision wholeheartedly—and who would grab almost any chance to work with her. When Knox asked Joel Sass to design the set for her latest production, he signed on immediately. “The thing I like about working with Wendy is once she asks you to be a creative team member, there’s a high degree of trust,” he says. “She allows herself to be influenced or guided by what you’re giving to her. She [gives] you creative latitude. There’s more elbow room, a true synthesis, and a true collaboration that can’t be found . . . with some other directors.”

Knox lives in a house on a sunny corner in Minneapolis’s Corcoran neighborhood. A red cedar picket fence surrounds her small yard, which is home to two golden retrievers who enthusiastically try to knock me over when I open the front door. Knox attempts to muscle her way through inches of thick fur, shouting, “Take a seat on the couch when you can!” Everywhere the eye can see, there are foot-high piles of yellowing newspapers. Old theater props gather dust in various corners. Scripts and Frank-related paperwork are carefully stacked like back issues of *The New Yorker*.

Two phones lines—both of which lead to Frank’s voice mail—are within easy reach. If it seems like Frank has invaded Knox’s life, it’s because Frank is her life. Even the downstairs bathtub has become a storage facility for odds and ends left over from various productions.

After she’s calmed her dogs, Knox relaxes in a worn sofa chair and frowns as she talks about what some of her detractors have said about her in print. A story that was published a year ago this month still irks her. A newspaper critic lauded Knox’s artistic adventurousness, but went on to say that Frank’s productions don’t always succeed because the material exceeds her skill. Maybe, she suggests, she’s just speaking a “different language”—one this particular critic doesn’t happen to understand.

At fifty, Knox is still as fearless as she was when she was an undergrad at Grinnell College in Iowa. While there, she became close friends with Fritz Ertl, who now teaches theater and acting at New York University. “As a bad-girl poster child, Wendy is a great role model for girls,” Ertl wrote in an e-mail message (he calls Knox his daughter’s titular godmother). “The fact of the matter is, Wendy is bigger than life. She’s huge in every way imaginable. She’s outspoken and ornery and very, very stubborn. She’s also incredibly opinionated, which makes some people uncomfortable, but she’s also really smart and dedicated and works like a dog. She probably has as much integrity about her work as anyone I know, which comes from an innate inability to compromise ever, about anything. Such integrity takes its toll, however, because

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in order to do things the way she wants them done, she has to do it all herself. Institutions are scared of her. Subscribers don't like bad girls."

Subscribers beware: This pronouncement will be put to the test from September 20 through October 14 when Frank Theatre invades the Guthrie's Dowling Studio with its production of Martin McDonagh's creepy thriller, *The Pillowman*. The Guthrie is an incongruous place for Frank to make an appearance, and it's a big step up in terms of visibility. Knox pitched the play to the Guthrie because she thought it would work well in the small, black-box theater, which the Guthrie has been extending to smaller companies in the community. This isn't the first time Knox has directed for the big G—her *Lysistrata* sold out at the Guthrie Lab eight years ago—but it is her first time in the new building.

An intense psychological drama about two brothers in an interrogation facility with a pair of detectives, *The Pillowman* raises disturbing questions about totalitarianism, censorship, freedom of speech, and the human need to understand life through stories. McDonagh's prize-winning play combines a Kafka-esque plotline with the surreal violence of a David Lynch film and the poetic stealth of a Sam Shepard play. It's a dark, gorgeous, haunting script. "It's twisted! It's fucked up!" Knox exclaims, her face lighting up like a kid's at Christmas. "I saw it in New York, and I don't usually direct plays I've seen, but this was the most complete theatrical experience I've ever had. I'm very excited to direct it." The play stars Jim Lichtscheidl, Grant Richey, Luverne Seifert, and Chris Carlson.

Knox's path to theatrical life was both conventional and unconventional, as most such paths are. At Grinnell, Knox originally majored in chemistry, but switched to a double major in English and theater. She got into theater on a whim—she'd done only a musical in high school, a decidedly un-Knoxian production of *Bye, Bye Birdie*. She ended up directing her first theater piece in college

because, she says, she had the "least experience" and no one else working on the project wanted the job.

Knox earned a master of fine arts in directing from the University of Washington. She became enamored of the work of downtown New York troupe Mabou Mines (the same company that brought its bizarre deconstruction of *A Doll's House* to the Walker in 2003). Lee Breuer, one of the founders of Mabou Mines, was particularly inspiring, as were experimental companies such as The

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Wooster Group and German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Knox spent her postgraduate years in Finland as a Fulbright scholar, which allowed her to see a great deal of international and Eastern European theater. She realized then that she didn't want to direct regional theater—she wanted "to do something in the world that mattered."

When she came home to Minnesota in 1985, she began searching for artists, per the advice of Breuer, who had similar ideals and aesthetics. "The people I started working with in Minneapolis didn't set out to start a theater company, we set out to do a play," she explains. "The whole point was to challenge ourselves and go against the complacency that was in local theater at the time." A couple of shows later—the first was *Farmyard*, about a family's attempts to deal with the unplanned pregnancy of their mentally retarded daughter; the second was Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher*, a disturbing exploration of racism among lower-class youths—and Knox had de facto started a theater company.

On July 9, Knox's artistic odyssey

landed her at a meeting for freelance and emerging directors. She was in a jovial mood and spouted off on one of her favorite topics. "I don't believe in the myth of 'making it,'" she told the room of twenty or so directors. "I don't believe in the idea that you have to work regionally or in New York for people to think you've made it. What constitutes 'making it'? 'Making it' implies you've hit something, you've arrived, and that it's easy street from then on. This myth is something that's created and perpetuated by the media, which makes certain artists the darling of the month or of the year, which is counterproductive. Artists need to define their own standards of success. You could look at me and say I've only directed one show at the Guthrie and not much regionally, so I'm a big loser. But you can also look at it and say I've kept a small, professional theater alive for eighteen years."

This was exactly what Genevieve Bennett, a twenty-nine-year-old director who moved here from New York City three years ago, needed to hear. "I didn't know what to expect from her," Bennett said. "I'm really glad she said what she did because it's true. It's good to be reminded of that. She's amazing."

For Knox, *The Pillowman* is simply another one of Frank's ventures, which happens to take place inside a multimillion-dollar institution. If she harbors dreams of making it by being invited into the Guthrie—her show is listed in the same program as *Jane Eyre*, Ian McKellen, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, after all—she hides it well. "*The Pillowman* is not a show that's going to be on the thrust stage," she tells the group, gesturing with her beer bottle for emphasis. "This way, they can put it in the studio and say, 'It's that naughty girl who can't behave that did it.'" When her audience laughs, Knox smiles triumphantly. She knows she's speaking to the next generation of rabble-rousers, and they like her, frankness and all. ▲

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