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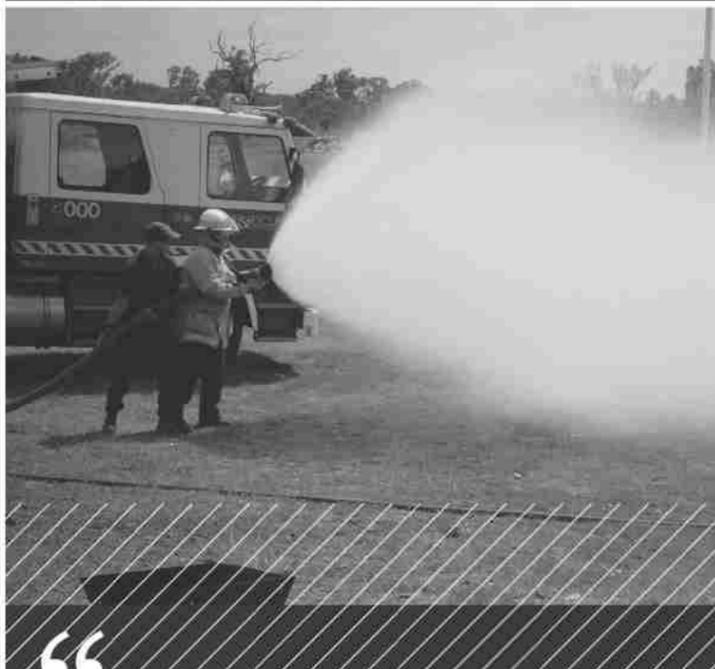
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KAITLYN MENARD

An artist shrouded in secrecy

New Studio Theatre production delves into the life and work of Gertrude Stein

theatrepreview

The Gertrude Stein Project

Directed and adapted by Beau Coleman
Designed by Katherine Jenkins
Starring Spenser Payne, Peter Fernandes, Samantha Hill, Nicola Elbro, and Jamie Cavanagh
Runs March 31-April 9 at 7:30 p.m.,
matinée performance on Thursday,
April 7 at 12:30 p.m.
Timms Centre for the Arts (87
Avenue and 112 Street)
\$5-20 at Tix-on-the-Square or at the
Timms Box Office

ALEX MIGDAL
Arts & Entertainment Staff

There's an air of mystery that hangs over the name Gertrude Stein. It generates that tip-of-the-tongue feeling where you can't quite figure out what she's known for, despite feeling you've heard the name before. Even director Beau Coleman knew little of Stein at first when she started work on her latest production *The Gertrude Stein Project*.

"It had always been sort of a curiosity in the back of my head that, at some point, I would like to find out more about her and tackle some of her texts," Coleman says. "The minute I started working on it, it started wanting to go into being its own piece."

Stein was, in fact, numerous things: a writer, poet, art collector, and part of a circle of high-profile literary friends whom she famously deemed "the lost generation." But it's her reclusive nature that makes her an ideal character to explore on stage. Bringing Stein to life has

been an organic process for Coleman, who conceived *The Gertrude Stein Project* entirely from scratch.

"The design process [was difficult] in a beautiful, wonderful way," says Coleman. "How do we create a space in which all this can occur and yet reflects the simplicity? It's very, very different. [...] We're creating something out of nothing."

"Anything that comes in visually, movement-wise, image-wise, vocally-wise, is considered text. So I was interested in not only just the written and the spoken, but what's the visual text? What's the movement text?"

BEAU COLEMAN
DIRECTOR, THE GERTRUDE STEIN PROJECT

Incidentally, it was by a stroke of luck that Coleman stumbled upon the project. She studied at Yale under Leon Katz, who discovered 1,500 notebooks penned by Stein. He reconstructed Stein's writings by interviewing her longtime partner Alice B. Toklas over four months. By sharing his findings with Coleman, he gave her rare access inside snippets of Stein's life, which came to form the basis of *The Gertrude Stein Project*.

"What are these little fragments?" Coleman asks. "We can take that idea of the archive and these fragments and create a bit of a sense [that]

we're not getting the full picture. And neither did Leon — he got these little fragments of notes [and] we're just getting these bits and pieces that are out of order."

As a result, Coleman chose to approach the project as a Steinian composition rather than a typical linear narrative. She also tackled the complexity of Stein's abstract writing by incorporating distinct visual motifs on stage.

"Stein is text, right?" she says. "Could we work this text as an object itself? Could we get a sense of anything as seen on that space? Anything that comes in visually, movement-wise, image-wise, vocally-wise, is considered text. So I was interested in not only just the written and the spoken, but what's the visual text? What's the movement text?"

"It's choreographed a lot," she continues. "The movement is central to the whole piece. It reads as a cross between theatre, dance, and spoken word. The motifs are through the creation of the choreography and, in some cases, the things that are closest aligned to the scenes."

While many critics have dismissed Stein's texts as unadaptable, Coleman believes that her vision truly reflects Stein's experimental approach to theatre, providing insight into a woman shrouded in mystery.

"[Stein says] the phrase 'theatre's landscape' and that we need to look at plays the same way we look at a painting — it's just there," says Coleman.

"You know, we might look at it, but it's not looking back at us, and so we don't necessarily have to tell [all] these stories. I think she would totally recognize that this is a landscape."