

PERFORMANCE PROSPECTUS

MICHELLE ELLSWORTH

Phone Homer

MAR 15- 18, 2012

Conceived by Michelle Ellsworth

Clytemnestra: Michelle Ellsworth

Aegisthus: Michelle Ellsworth

Helen: Michelle Ellsworth

Agamemnon: Michelle Ellsworth

Penelope: Michelle Ellsworth

Electra: Tara Rynders

Text: Homer and Aeschylus

Text Sampling and Supplementation: Michelle Ellsworth and Ann Ellsworth

Music: Dave Willey

Art Direction and Web Design: Max Bernstein

Costume design and make-up: Markas Henry and Janice Benning

Video: Bob Shannon and Max Bernstein

Set Design: Priscilla Cohan

Lighting design: JP Osnes

Web Programming: Satchel Spencer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Note from OtB.....	2
Interview Excerpt.....	3
Beginner's Guide.....	4
Essay.....	5
Bios.....	8
Funder Credits.....	12

A NOTE FROM OTB

This past weekend I attended the Whitney Biennial where three On the Boards veterans – Gisele Vienne, Richard Maxwell and Sarah Michelson – are participating in the most current edition of this notable and sometimes infamous survey show of contemporary artists. Not only was it thrilling to watch Michelson's performers walk and run backward in circles over the 100 foot expanse of the Whitney's huge fourth floor but it also felt historic. Over the past few decades, artists younger than 50 years old who deal primarily with performance haven't gotten much play in visual art contexts and finally it feels like a new generation of artists are starting to be taken seriously outside of theaters.

So, here's a tip to the curators of the next biennial: Michelle Ellsworth is your girl. Why? Well, this is where it gets tricky. When describing her work, one usually starts by describing Michelle: She was raised a Mormon. She's got Mensa level intelligence. She's neurotic, hilarious and an incredibly generous soul. She's from Boulder, Colorado so even though she's performed in prominent venues and has received prestigious awards, she's an outsider, who mostly works alone. This is partly because what she makes is less about making theater or dance, and more about her creating a universe where she can share her latest research and ideas. In her case, this means holing up and pondering the obsolescence of the Y chromosome, talking with scientists, reading philosophy, working with her son to create fictional websites and shooting videos of her perverse rituals with hamburgers.

When she finally takes the stage, what results is a frenetic outpouring of everything she's been tackling. The depth, intricacy and design of her efforts can be astonishing and difficult to consume at first but rewards viewers who spend time in her world. The same can be said of the best artists, regardless of their discipline or medium, who require us to take a little bit more time and a few steps backward to fully comprehend the complexity of their expressions. In other words, take a deep look at that hamburger she's sacrificing – it's a loaded proposition. The websites flashing by you tackle grief, loyalty, violence and death. Michelle is our kind of artist – she is relevant and speaks to many different subjects in many different contexts. Here's to Miche and her incredible collaborators - Tara, Max, Priscilla and JP. We're proud to be hosting the world premiere of *Phone Homer*.

Lane Czaplinski

INTERVIEW EXCERPT WITH MICHELLE ELLSWORTH

Lane Czaplinski: [The hamburger] ...you've called it "your medium" and it shows up in your work consistently.

Michelle Ellsworth: It does. The work of Josh Ozersky, the food writer, he says it well. He says that, "the hamburger is both the icon of freedom and the quintessence of conformity." And I think that says it well. It speaks to me, metaphorically. It's ripe for the pickin', I think.

LC: Awesome. So, Clytemnestra... you're interested in Greek Myth. Why are you interested in this character?

ME: So this version of Clytemnestra comes from Homer's *The Illiad*, and I was initially attracted to it just because you know, that book, *The Illiad*, it's often described as the genesis of the Western canon. So it seemed to me, as one who has always had profound suspicions about the Western canon, I thought that it would be a good place to look for trouble. So I just initially read it because I thought—I wasn't looking for trouble, but I had read it as an undergrad and I read it again—because the absence of women struck me and then the centrality of Agamemnon and the impact of his choices on his wife, Clytemnestra, at home. So I thought it...might be pleasing for me to look and imagine what Clytemnestra's perspective might be on the Trojan War was. And what happened to lead her to go from a devout wife to one that would kill her husband, Agamemnon. The initial impulse—but it was really just about, you know, as a sister in the house, she's a big ol' archetype. I thought I'd like to try and tell her side of it a wee bit.

LISTEN TO THE ENTIRE INTERVIEW
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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MICHELLE ELLSWORTH

- 1.** Michelle Ellsworth is a solo performance artist who has made works across multiple mediums, including “performable websites.” In *Phone Homer* she has gone so far as to create an entire internet that is focused on the mythic character Clytemnestra. This includes everything from a Pandora radio with music/ads for this particular character to a YouTube full of lamentation dances. Look closely throughout the show and you’ll catch a glimpse of how her web is thoroughly geared towards Clytemnestra!
- 2.** One of Michelle’s chosen mediums is the hamburger. For about 15 years she has been performing hamburger sacrifices and alterations. These sacrifices will appear occasionally in *Phone Homer*, but in the meantime you can peruse her [Burger Foundation](#) and [watch](#) this hamburger short.
- 3.** The Clytemnestra character has been a reoccurring one for Michelle throughout the past decade. During her 2005 appearance at OtB, she performed a piece with a dress that could solve problems, which she has referred to as Clytemnestra’s outfit for after she has murdered her husband.
- 4.** Michelle is a professor of dance at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is noted there for teaching classes that span not just dance, but also science, theater, music and film.
- 5.** What version of *The Iliad* got Michelle inspired? The Robert Fitzgerald translation. She has frequently drawn on this text, remixing and mashing it up, in her Clytemnestra-centric works.



MEAT, MEN AND A MYTHOLOGICAL MURDERESS

by Ruby Blondell, Professor of Classics, University of Washington

Since the dawn of mythological time, meat, murder and the male have been locked in a disturbingly intimate dance around the barbecue. In the beginning, as the ancient poet Hesiod tells it, there was no need for the Y chromosome. The first offspring in his myth of cosmic history are born without a father. Among them, however, was the sky god Ouranos, born parthenogenetically to Gaia, the earth mother. Thenceforth Gaia gave birth after mating with him and other males. Once sexual dimorphism was established, goddesses lost their reproductive independence and the upstart male went from strength to strength, culminating in the rise to power of Zeus, the prolific “father of gods and men”. It looked like the Y-chromosome was here to stay.

On the human level the story plays out slightly differently. Among mortals, it was men who got here first and thrived for a time without the other gender. Unlike the primal divine powers, however, they were never able to procreate asexually. For that they needed women, who came later in the person of Pandora, the first human female, bestowed on them by the gods as a “gift”. Pandora is best known for ending men’s happy homosocial existence by opening a jar full of evils that immediately spread throughout the world. On the plus side, she also supplied them with the ability to reproduce. This gave mortal men a kind of surrogate immortality by allowing them to perpetuate their name and line. Despite the trouble caused by Pandora, then, sexual dimorphism served the interests of the male from the start, leaving the Y-chromosome secure in its primacy--or so it would seem.

If we backtrack a bit, Pandora’s arrival turns out to have resulted from a barbecue gone awry. Back in the good old days, when gods and men still mingled freely and women had yet to be created, the crafty Prometheus tried to trick Zeus by offering him his choice of two portions of an ox to eat at a feast. One comprised tasty meat and rich fat, concealed under the unappetising stomach, the other was nothing but bones, covered with a tempting layer of succulent, shining fat. Angered by this deception, Zeus hid fire from mortals, but Prometheus, out of pity, stole it back for them. This is where Pandora enters the picture. Zeus had her made as

a punishment for Prometheus' theft, and gave her to men, says Hesiod, "in exchange" for fire. This story is a founding myth not only for sexual reproduction but for the institution of ritual sacrifice. In ancient Greek sacrifice an animal--an ox being the most prestigious victim--was felled with an axe and roasted over an open fire. The bones were then offered to the gods--who also enjoyed the savory smoke from the burning fat--and the meat shared among their mortal worshipers. The feast was a convivial event, more like a 4th of July barbecue than the average church service. As such it brought the community together. But sacrifice also codified and enacted the proper distinctions among gods (who should receive sacrificial honor), non-human animals (who are sacrificial victims) and humans (who are situated in between).

Like sexual dimorphism, then, animal sacrifice unites members of a social group while also generating and affirming biological and cultural divisions. This may help to explain why it is so closely intertwined with the creation of woman. Pandora is not just a payment for fire but its equivalent. Like fire, women are an ambiguous presence in the world of men. Fire is a destructive force, but also makes possible cooking, metalwork, and other aspects of human culture--including sacrifice itself; women brought all the world's evils, but also allow men to reproduce.

Greek men were not very grateful for the female reproductive contribution. The fact that they needed women at all was, rather, a source of some resentment. One misogynistic male wishes, for example, that men could simply purchase children cash down, dispensing altogether with the involvement of the female. At the same time, men could never quite shake off the fear that women--unlike themselves--could exist independently of the other gender. Human females do not, to be sure, enjoy Gaia's literal power of parthenogenesis, yet women are often described as a separate "race". Hesiod calls Pandora, for example, the progenitor of the "race" of females, as if she were somehow exclusively responsible for all the women to follow. A fear of female independence underwrites many myths, notably that of the Amazons, an independent society of females who use men as mere sperm donors, retaining only their daughters and banishing their sons. In other stories, mothers who care too much about their daughters, especially at the expense of the male line, are viewed with deep suspicion.

This brings us to our mythological murderess. In order to obtain the winds he needed to launch the Trojan War, king Agamemnon sacrificed

his daughter Iphigenia to the gods. Here the themes of meat and murder become a bit too close for comfort. Even if we overlook the kinship between father and daughter, human sacrifice is a monstrous perversion of the proper hierarchical relationships between humans, animals and gods. Granted, Agamemnon does not actually barbecue the girl--let alone eat her--but he does put her in the position properly occupied only by a food animal. Sacrificing one's daughter is not quite the same as throwing her on a hamburger grill on a national holiday--but nor is it entirely different. Clytemnestra, the girl's mother, shows her solidarity with the female line by retaliating in kind. She slaughters her husband with an axe in his turn, as if he were a sacrificial ox.

Like her husband's crime, this murder violates not only kinship bonds but the proper boundary between humans and other animals. This time, however, other distinctions are also at stake, notably the gender hierarchy that entered the human world along with sacrifice. The war between the sexes is played out as a shocking perversion of sacrificial ritual by both spouses. Clytemnestra--especially as portrayed by the tragic dramatist Aeschylus--threatens not only the authority of the male but the fundamental distinction between the genders on which it is based. She evinces a "masculine" personality and behavior, culminating in an appropriation of the male prerogative of bloody slaughter.

Modern Americans eat vastly more meat than ancient Greeks, who had no fast-food hamburgers, only the periodic ritual slaughter of slow food. There have been other changes too. Glistening fat, for example, no longer holds out the same irresistible allure. Yet we still ritualize the cooking and consumption of barbecued meat, and it still plays a role in articulating the distinction between the sexes. Meat cooked over a naked flame beneath the open sky remains the culinary province of manly men, and steak their official foodstuff (as opposed to chicken, salad, or chocolate). The modern male may no longer wield the axe, but he still affirms his masculinity by taking his place beside the barbecue. Yet the values embodied in this affirmation of manhood are under constant attack. The veggie-burger is on the march, along with increasing rumors of the Y-chromosome's imminent demise. Ever since Dolly the sheep, moreover, the possibility of strictly feminine reproductive strategies has been back in the cards. Dolly is no Gaia--or Clytemnestra--but she would doubtless be only too happy to see a ban on barbecued meat. The Y-chromosome has been put on notice. It must remain ever vigilant lest, like Agamemnon, it end up out of a job.

BIOS

It's been a challenging role for **Aegisthus** to play both grandson and son of Thyestes (as a result of Thyestes indiscretions with his own daughter, Pelopia), and to co-star as Clytemnestra's lover. Abandoned by Thyestes and Pelopia in shame, Aegisthus was raised by shepherds and suckled by a goat until his uncle Atreus, enemy of Thyestes, took him in. Atreus, as the biological father of both Agamemnon and Menelaus, eventually asks Aegisthus to kill Thyestes, but instead, Thyestes convinces Aegi to kill Atreus due to Atreus' little indiscretion of serving the flesh of Thyestes' first two sons to Thyestes himself. Predictably, with all this long-standing bad family blood, and some miscellaneous rueful indiscretions, Agamemnon and Aegisthus don't get along, on stage or off.

Agamemnon, "the Very Steadfast," was the commander-in-chief during the Trojan War and killed at least 15 by his own bravery, gallantry and sword even after alienating Achilles by stealing his girl, Briseis. Agamemnon also scored Cassandra as part of his conquests before returning home to celebrate the victory. Agamemnon would like to thank the gods, especially Artemis for the "winning wind" that set sail towards the trojan war, (totally worth the sacrifices he had to make of his daughter, Iphigenia), his parents, King Atreus and Queen Aerope, for their examples of "loyalty," and his children, Orestes and Electra, for avenging his murder.

For years now, **Clytemnestra** has been performing Daughter of Tyndareus and Leda, (King and Queen of Sparta), sister of Helen, and wife of Agamemnon. Devoted and devastated mother of four - Orestes, Electra, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis - Clytemnestra is known for her ability to mercurially shift from the role of weak and submissive to ruthless and manipulative. During Agamemnon's ten-year absence leading the Greek army during the Trojan war, Clytemnestra took Aegisthus as a lover. Clytemnestra performs her role as "Murderous Wife" upon Agamemnon's returning, stabbing him in a bathtub with a knife. Eight years later, Orestes, helped by Electra, kills both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, ending Clytemnestra's reign as the "Quintessential Queen of Ancient Greece." Clytemnestra would like to thank Martha Graham for her support and understanding.

Helen, daughter of Leda, Queen of Sparta, and Zeus, is the sister of Clytemnestra, wife of Menelaus, and has loved playing the part "Most

Beautiful Woman of Troy” for ages, never tiring of the role. Helen, “the face that launched a thousand ships,” was promised to Paris by Aphrodite, thus initiating the Trojan War. Helen is happy that upon the subsequent victory of the Greeks and Paris’ death, she eventually reconciles with Menelaus, leading her down a road to interpersonal happiness. Helen would like to thank her stylist, Janice Benning.

Penelope is thrilled to be a part of the On the Boards premiere of *Phone Homer*. As the daughter of Icarus, and a cousin of Clytemnestra, Penelope is grateful for her supporting role in this production. Despite having had many suitors, Penelope faithfully awaited the return of her husband, Odysseus, during his twenty-year absence (ten years during at the siege of Troy and ten years in his wanderings afterwards). Critics loved her in her longest-running role as “the Devoted Wife” in “How to Weave your Way out of a One Night Stand,” where her character claimed that she would not remarry until she finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus’ father, Laertes, that she unraveled each night. As a symbol of connubial fidelity, Penelope is pleased that, night after night, she can provide a shining example of marital faithfulness for Clytemnestra and her audiences world wide.

Max Bernstein was born in Buffalo, NY where he received his BA in Media Study, with a production concentration from the University at Buffalo. Bernstein’s work meanders through the liminal spaces between cinema, theater, sculpture, performance, and media, arriving at interdisciplinary experiences. Through his explorations, Bernstein attempts to make transparent the importance of the dynamic relationship between subject and spectator, illustrated by philosophies of subjective idealism, existential ontology, and the theater of the absurd. Bernstein is also interested in contending with the limitations and problems of presentation and representation, which are inherent to moving image and other forms of projected work. Max received his MFA in film and studio art from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He currently resides in Denver, Colorado, as artist, collaborator, and adjunct instructor at University of Colorado at Boulder and Rocky Mountain College of Art and design.

Priscilla Cohan received her Bachelor of Fine Art from University of Colorado in Studio Ceramics. Her work in the theater includes performances in Richard Goulis’ *Block*, and as a puppet in Jainie Geisers’ *Evidence of Floods, House of Birds* by George Peters and Melanie Walker,

and in *The Adventures of Zimmo!*, a 5 DVD for children. Her contributions to stage sets include, *Hey, Stop That!* written and directed by Thalia Field, *The Rise and Fall of Pirate Jenny* by Ethelyn Friend and *Gifts from Unknown Islands* by Mark McCoin. She is a long time collaborator with Michelle Ellsworth and has created sculpture, machines and objects for several productions with Michelle for 10 years.

Ann Ellsworth is a struggling co-writer, the solo horn player for the Grammy-nominated Absolute Ensemble, and has been a member of the Esbjerg Ensemble, Manhattan Brass, Baltimore Opera, Phoenix Symphony, and Philharmonica del Bajio. An active soloist and chamber musician, Ms. Ellsworth has performed on several continents and can be heard in numerous recordings, film and television scores, and radio broadcasts. Ms. Ellsworth attended the Eastman and Juilliard Schools, with further study in Oslo, Norway and St. Petersburg, Russia. She has held faculty positions at numerous schools in the New York City area and joined the Stony Brook faculty in September 2009. Ann has been collaborating with Michelle Ellsworth since 1976.

Michelle Ellsworth makes solo performance work, performable websites, drawings, and videos. She was awarded the USA Artists Knight Fellowship for 2011. She has performed at Diverseworks, Dance Theater Workshop, Jacob's Pillow, On the Boards and Brown University. Her drawings, spreadsheets, and scripts have been published in CHAIN and her screen dances have been seen around Europe and throughout the U.S. Ellsworth is currently working on a 7-inch recording with drummer Sean Meehan.

Markas Henry (Costume Designer) Scenic and Costume Designs: New York: *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*, *Old Wicked Songs*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, *After the Rain*, *The Last Session*, *Listen to My Heart - the Songs of David Friedman*, *Escape From Pterodactyl Island* and *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*. Regional: Curious Theatre, Theatre Aspen, Opera Colorado, The Old Globe, Geffen Playhouse, Yale Dramat, Opera Co. of North Carolina, and Westport Country Playhouse. Broadway: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Life*, *Grease*, *Busker's Alley*, *The Tempest*, *Saint Joan* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Film: *Elf*, *I'm With Lucy*, *Fled* and *Leading Ladies*. Since 1991, Resident Designer for The Barrow Group (Drama Desk Award Best Company and Nomination of Outstanding Production for *Pentecost*). Briefly, Costume Designer for the soap opera *Another World*. Costume Producer: Britney Spear's 2001 and 2004

US and World Tours. Assistant Professor of Costume Design at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Satchel Spencer is a video maker, web programmer, photographer, and traceur. His work has been performed at Juilliard, the New School, Denver Museum of Contemporary Art, and Dance Theatre Workshop. Satchel has been collaborating with Michelle Ellsworth since 1994. This summer, Spencer and Ellsworth will be making a documentary on Parkour in London.

J P Osnes has served as a production designer and manager for a wide variety of performers dating back to 1983. Highlights include lighting Wynton Marsalis' pre-Grammy tour, arranging sanctified hosts for Pope John Paul II, showering chocolate sauce off of Karen Finley, designing sets for Bizet's *Carmen* and marveling over an amazing pasta shrimp salad with Lou Reed. He has a deep and abiding love for any performer who makes a new path.

Tara Rynders is an international video dance artist who layers performance, remixed sound scores and site-specific performance. Rynders graduated from CU Boulder with her M.F.A. in dance and interdisciplinary performance. Rynders, a former Platteforum artist-in-residence, is the artistic director of "you & me" and has been commissioned to screen her video work internationally through Europe, the USA and Mexico. Rynders has performed at The Denver Art Museum, The Garage, San Francisco, Cholula, MX, The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, The Boulder Fringe Festival, The Atlas Black Box Theatre and The Nevada Art Museum. Rynders is also an ER nurse who appreciates the intimate moments that occur daily with patients and families she has just met. Rynders considers it one of the highest honors to perform alongside Michelle Ellsworth. She is truly grateful for this woman, her art and her movement.

Dave Willey is a multi-instrumentalist, dance accompanist, producer, engineer and composer. He leads the group Hamster Theatre, and is the bassist for Thinking Plague, both of whom have released numerous cd's on the Cuneiform label, and both of whom have played many festivals in the U.S. and in Europe. He has recorded many scores for dance for area choreographers Nancy Smith, Onye Ozuzu, Deborah Reshotko, Michelle Ellsworth and many others. He has co-produced cds with Lorna Hunt, Henry Winters, Veelah, and Jesse Manley. His latest solo cd, "Immeasurable Currents" was released in 2011 on the

Italian AltRock label. He is currently performing in the area with Julie Monley and Frederic DesMoulins, The Glenn Taylor Orchestra, Veelah, MIME, The Corvettes, The Dexter Payne Quartet, The Amelie Trio, and Hamster Theatre.

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Phone Homer photos by Michelle Ellsworth

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