

■ BROOKLYN, N.Y., AND CHAPEL HILL, N.C.

# APOCALYPSE THEN



**TIME AND GENRE EVAPORATE IN** *Elsewhere*, a multimedia “cello opera” premiering Oct. 11 at **Carolina Performing Arts** in Chapel Hill, N.C., then traveling to the **Brooklyn Academy of Music** Oct. 17–20. Created by super-cellist Maya Beiser and iconoclastic director Robert Woodruff, *Elsewhere* is performed by Beiser and vocalist Helga Davis, who enact a conversation between Lot’s nameless Wife, of Old Testament fame, and the gentle protagonist of the 1938 prose-poem *I Am Writing to You from a*

*Far Off Country*, by Belgian surrealist writer Henri Michaux. The two characters—backed up by a film by Peter Nigrini and four dancers choreographed by Karole Armitage—bear witness to the ends of their worlds and share a dialogue across time and space.

*Elsewhere* began as *Far Off Country*, a recording of Michaux’s poem with music by composer Eve Beglarian, for Beiser’s album *Another Place*. Performed live, however, something felt missing, and Beiser enlisted Woodruff, a previous collaborator, to help turn the recitation into a stand-alone theatrical event. It soon became clear that Michaux’s heroine needed another woman to talk to. Enter Lot’s Wife, who famously defied God’s command when she looked back at Sodom’s demise and was turned into a pillar of salt. Screenwriter Erin Cressida Wilson was commissioned to flesh out the skeletal story, and Missy Mazzoli was brought on to compose the score. The composition that resulted, called *Salt*, forms the second half of *Elsewhere*, which was workshopped in 2011 at **Mass MoCA** in North Adams, Mass.

Taking the cello into theatrical territory as no one has before her, Beiser has endured

criticism from classical music purists—and praise for her acting chops from other quarters. But her dramatic flair runs deep. Since she was a little girl, on a virtuoso track and a Tiger Mom’s practice regimen, Beiser’s secret backup plan was to be a theatre or film director. In her earliest performances she paid attention to the “musical event as a complete theatrical experience,” Beiser says. With *Elsewhere*, she decided to go all-out.

“Maya is an instigator—she wants to invent form,” says collaborator Woodruff. “She plays cello like she’s pushing the red line on a Maserati. In rehearsal I work with Maya as I would an actor, speaking about images and precision.”

Every note in *Elsewhere* is supplied by the cello, which has its own character arc: “There are moments where it sounds lush and acoustic, and moments where it is processed and sounds like a wild, grungy electric guitar,” Beiser allows. But for the cellist, *Elsewhere* is about more than art—it’s at once a personal attack against blind obedience and a tribute to the brave women who “keep their eyes open” in the most beleaguered corners of our world. With this new work, Beiser emerges as a full-fledged theatre artist deeply invested in human harmony. —*Cassandra Csensitz*

■ ATLANTA

## VAMPIRES, GORE AND ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

If you felt the one thing missing from Bram Stoker’s classic *Dracula* was a rock score, then get over to Atlanta’s **7 Stages Theatre**, which is kicking off its 34th season with *Dracula: The Rock Opera* (through Oct. 14). Creators Rob Thompson and Shane Morton, along with Thompson’s Little Five Points Rock Star Orchestra, say the shows stays true to its source material—while adding 40 new songs inspired by Thin Lizzy, Alice Cooper and Deep Purple. “I am writing music that supports the mood of the song and still has a rock edge,” says Thompson, who will also star as the titular vampire. *Dracula* will be the final show at 7 Stages for artistic director Del Hamilton, after 33 years at the theatre he co-founded. “We feel we have found a way into the mystery of *Dracula*,” he enthuses. “Lots of blood, gore—and no goofy romance.” —*Joseph Sims*

■ BROOKLYN, N.Y.

## BLOOD LIBEL, REVISITED

“I’VE ALWAYS WANTED TO DO A PLAY ABOUT Skokie [Illinois],” says actor and playwright Hannah Bos, who grew up in nearby Evanston. “You don’t explicitly know that *Blood Play* takes place in Skokie. When we found this creepy, medieval, anti-Semitic mythology, and these fear-mongering old texts and woodcuttings that are the seed of this play—we didn’t know that it would translate into a 1950s ranch house.”

Incongruity is not unusual in the work of Bos’s Brooklyn-based **Debate Society**, which she co-founded nearly a decade ago with fellow writer/actor Paul Thureen and director Oliver Butler. Known for elaborate sets and stylized explorations of the American past through genre-based plays, the company has developed a reputation for marrying disparate elements in surprising ways that resonate far beyond the bounds of genre.

The 2010 production of *Buddy Cop 2*, which won an Obie, combined ‘80s “buddy cop” movies and a fictional tabloid scandal about attempted infanticide to tell a bittersweet story of small town America’s loss of innocence. In *Blood Play*, which runs Oct. 3–27 at Brooklyn’s **Bushwick Starr**, the Debate Society filters the medieval concept of “blood libel”—the idea that Jews would murder Christian children for their blood—through the vocabulary of thriller cinema to explore how fear-mongering is used to control others.

“With genre, what we like to do is play with expectations of how stories work, but not in an ironic way, or a way that creates distance with the audience,” explains director Butler.

Thureen agrees. “It’s a thriller as far as we’re concerned. But would anyone else see this and think it’s a thriller?” he adds hypothetically, with a chuckle. “It’s a Debate Society thriller, which means it’s also kind of sad.” —*Jeremy M. Barker*



From left, Thureen, Bos and Butler