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Care and Feeding of Plays and Playwrights

By **JESSE GREEN**

MONDAY Something felt very unusual about the first public reading, earlier this month, of Brooke Berman's "Out of the Water." It wasn't just that the play was good; that sometimes happens. Nor was it so rare to find, even on a bitter Monday night in February, an enthusiastic audience of 40 and a top-notch cast of young theater names. But it seemed almost suspicious that a hip new play by a writer not widely known was being presented in a room with comfortable seats. Also, the heat worked. And what had become of the rats and pigeons that usually attended such readings? Who printed the nice programs? Why were the bathrooms so lovely?

The answer to all of these questions was Ars Nova, the mighty little uptown-downtown theatrical venture on far West 54th Street, which was presenting "Out of the Water" as part of its Out Loud play-reading series. In a landscape defined by stately institutional behemoths and youthful but impoverished start-ups, Ars Nova has designed something new from the best elements of each. That night, and in different, surprising ways every night that week, the young theater focused on the necessary middle, valorizing emerging art and artists by putting them in an environment usually reserved for grandees.

So Ms. Berman got to hear her play — "to engage with it as a 3-D animal," she said — without having to act as her own producer, director, dramaturge, stage crew, publicist, graphic designer and exterminator. Nor did she have to worry about the needs of the marketplace. In fact, there was no marketplace. Though many shows developed at Ars Nova have proved popular in later incarnations, the theater itself has mounted only two commercial transfers, both by chance on Jewish themes: Daniel Goldfarb's "Modern Orthodox" in 2004 and [Judy Gold's](#) "25 Questions for a Jewish Mother," now in its fifth month Off Broadway.

Ms. Berman said this put the spotlight where it belonged: on the work. Not that she, or Ars Nova, would object to commercial prospects; the producer Daryl Roth picked up Ms. Berman's "Hunting and Gathering," an earlier Out Loud play, for a forthcoming run downtown. But Ars Nova has nothing financial to gain. It doesn't even ask playwrights to grant the industry-standard "first look" option. As a result the playwrights are not hobbled with obligations to anything except their plays.

This is not an oversight, but a characteristic choice. Like several Ars Nova programs, Out Loud is budgeted as a total loss. (Tickets are free.) Other offerings at least produce some income, but profit does not seem to be a priority; if it were, they'd expand the bar, rent the room to outside events and run hits like the current "At Least It's Pink" for three years at \$75 a ticket instead of limiting it to 12 weeks at \$32.50 or less. In that way some 330 events are crammed into the 99-seat space each year on an operating budget of about \$1.2 million: a pittance by comparison to other theaters and not even enough, it would seem, to cover salaries, let alone the classy midcentury modern aesthetic. Nice doorknobs add up.

But Jon Steingart and Jenny Wiener, who founded Ars Nova in 2002 and now run it with Jason Eagan, say the

financial model — which at first seems insane — makes sense if you understand their focus on new works, new artists and new audiences. Many companies aim for one or two; Ars Nova aims for all three at once.

“A lot of not-for-profit theaters are driven by middle-aged women buying \$100 tickets,” Mr. Steingart said. “But you can’t build a younger audience that way. And you can’t support younger artists if you charge \$50 a ticket, because no one knows who they are. Our goal is to be as competitive as we can to a night at the movies. Even before we converted to not-for-profit status last year, it was never a commercial venture.”

Ms. Wiener added, “We are only interested in development.”

“That’s our role,” Mr. Eagan put in. “To throw it all up and see what sticks.”

Just not on the lovely wallpaper.

TUESDAY The next night offered a clue to Ars Nova’s finances in the unlikely form of Langhorne Slim, a 26-year-old Dylanesque troubadour in a frayed velvet suit. The capacity crowd, almost none over 30 and many well oiled at the bar, sang along with his slacker love songs: “Now I’m dreamin’ of leaving my demons/And the first one I’m leavin’ is you.”

New artist? Check. New audience? Check.

But what was this new audience new to? Perhaps to Ars Nova’s Uncharted series (“A forum for burgeoning singer-songwriters”) but certainly not to boozy club dates. And though the downtown director Alex Timbers had been hired for a day’s worth of guidance, it was hard to see this as a theatrical event. What was it doing here?

The answer goes back to the founding of Ars Nova, a story Ms. Wiener, now 39, has told often enough that it no longer makes her cry.

In 1997 her brother, Gabe, a recording executive and sound engineer, was building a new studio — christened Ars Nova, Latin for “new art” — in what was still called Hell’s Kitchen. The building’s foundation was poured, and two floors of steel were in place when he suddenly died of a burst brain aneurysm, at 26. For two years his sister, who had been producing Off Broadway theater, let the place sit fallow while she decided what to make of her loss and of the windfall (not just the property but also a lot of money from his estate) that came with it.

“I thought if I could somehow turn what was undoubtedly the worst event of my life into a way for other people to create art,” she said, “it would be a way of keeping a living relationship with my brother.”

Ms. Wiener had recently begun collaborating with Mr. Steingart, a Los Angeles film and comedy producer. Together they scouted ideas for the new venture among New York performance spaces like Fez and Westbeth (both now defunct), places that felt like a hub or clubhouse. Accordingly they revamped the unfinished building’s design to include a top-floor apartment, called the penthouse, for entertaining, and even a bedroom suite to lure out-of-town artists. In March 2002, six months before Ms. Wiener and Mr. Steingart were married, Ars Nova opened, a discreet glass panel in the building’s entranceway etched with the words “For Gabe.”

If a building can be dedicated, this one surely was. Because Gabe was a musician, music would be part of its mission. And because Gabe had been so young, they would fill it with young people and encourage

adventurousness.

“It’s that incredibly rare thing in theater,” Mr. Timbers said, “a meritocracy.” He described the major institutional companies as “impenetrable” to a young director (he’s 28) and the usual downtown suspects (he’s artistic director of the avant-garde troupe Les Freres Corbusier) as threadbare. “But here, they work on hunches,” he said. He will be directing Ars Nova’s next extended-run production, an interactive comedy called “Dixie’s Tupperware Party,” this spring. “They’re willing to make this investment, in me even. And the lighting setup they have is unbelievable.”

So is the sound setup, as Mr. Slim seemed at pains to prove.

WEDNESDAY An entirely sensible career path at Ars Nova led Mary Faber from barkeep in 2002 to featured guest in its Broadway Spotlight Series in 2007. Granted, she landed a big job (as a replacement Kate Monster in “Avenue Q”) in between. But here she was, delighting a full house with almost anything but standards: skits, pseudo-autobiographical monologues and songs from unproduced new shows. “I just wanted to do something anti-cabaret,” she said later. “I wanted to play.”

Though there is little crossover among the audiences for its signature events, Ars Nova has managed to develop a brand image around youth, hipness (the remote location may actually help with this) and a kind of heartfelt snark. But in working this brand so successfully, and in dedicating its programs to developing talents and audiences, Ars Nova itself has landed at a developmental crossroads.

For one thing, pretty much all of the money Ms. Wiener realized from her brother’s estate, money that financed the building and its operations, is now gone. Even with it, the budget was always tight; Mr. Steingart and Ms. Wiener do not even draw a salary. Two new ventures — a college touring program and a two-year development deal with NBC Universal — may increase revenue, but the pricing policy, the size of the facilities and even the core mission constrain the possibilities. After only five years the theater faces its version of the classic “success of the small” dilemma: What happens when the young artists you nurture start to think big?

THURSDAY At 7 p.m. 11 “emerging” playwrights from Ars Nova’s twice a month Play Group splayed themselves around the penthouse, reading and discussing one another’s works-in-progress. The first, an oddball-brothers drama by 23-year-old Carly Mensch, still needed a title before its scheduled debut at Out Loud on March 12. It also needed a second half.

Not that anyone chided her, even when she asked for criticism. Ars Nova’s 27-year-old literary manager, Kim Rosenstock, instead led the gentlest possible discussion. (“I thought the nicest moment was...”) “It’s like a pep rally with pizza and beer,” said Ms. Mensch, who like a few of the others attends Juilliard by day. “At school I can only bring in my A material. Here I can bring in anything. And with no teachers it feels less like presenting than sharing.”

The mounded bowls of M&M’s, not to mention the Sub-Zero fridge filled with wine, all contribute to the sense that Ars Nova considers these young playwrights’ art valuable regardless of whether it’s successful. And yet, with surprising frequency, it does succeed. A play by Liz Flahive, another member of the Play Group, was enough of a hit last year at Out Loud that Ars Nova wants to promote it to a “mainstage” production. But the play, “From Up Here,” is audacious in more than its writing: it requires a cast of eight and an actual set. Ars Nova’s space can’t

accommodate it.

To solve the problem, Mr. Steingart said, the theater is planning to collaborate with a larger not-for-profit in presenting “From Up Here” this fall. It could be a risky step.

For all the control it gives away, Ars Nova can seem like one of Judy Gold’s Jewish mothers. That night, while the playwrights were being pampered upstairs, downstairs in the theater Bridget Everett was rampaging her way through a performance of “At Least It’s Pink,” a raunchy singspiel painstakingly developed by Mr. Eagan over the course of several years. He discovered Ms. Everett half-naked at a karaoke bar, gave her deadlines for new material, developed her stage savvy by making her host of Ars Nova’s Automatic Vaudeville series for 18 months; Mr. Steingart then fixed her up with the director Michael Patrick King. The result, while still raw (few uptown shows feature Dixieland-style songs about aborting twins), was infinitely more refined than earlier versions I’d seen.

It was easy to understand how the process would appeal to Ms. Everett, emerging in more ways than one. But what was the appeal to Mr. King, better known as an executive producer of TV series like “Sex and the City.” “If you’re not always emerging, you’re dead,” he said.

FRIDAY Though it promised performances by the Varsity Interpretive Dance Squad and an obese transvestite in tights, I skipped most of Automatic Vaudeville, which began around 11 that Thursday night; emerging art is tough for people who have to make a train. Which is why Ars Nova’s biggest long-term problem, like every theater’s, won’t be finding acts and material but maintaining an audience for them. Hipsters age quickly.

In part to address that problem, Ars Nova this year inaugurated an education program called Script and Stage. On Friday morning, after removing incriminating “At Least It’s Pink” memorabilia from the lobby, Ms. Rosenstock, who runs the program, welcomed two very excited classes of sixth graders from the Urban Assembly Academy of Arts and Letters. Two teaching artists put students named Sparkle, Heaven, Zippy, Dijon and about 40 others through warm-up exercises and writing rubrics; another two teaching artists were working with classes back at the school. Over the course of 15 weeks the students will develop, revise and rehearse monologues and scenes, and perform them, in June, on Ars Nova’s stage. Ms. Rosenstock said she has not yet determined how to accommodate all the family members who will want to see the results.

Also not determined: how to pay for the program as it inevitably grows. Script and Stage is another total write-off for Ars Nova; the school covers the buses, the theater everything else.

As Gabe Wiener’s cash disappears, Mr. Steingart, Ms. Wiener, Mr. Eagan and Ms. Rosenstock wonder if the rest of the city will step up to support what they made of his larger gift. As Mr. King said, if they’re not always emerging, they’re dead. Perhaps that’s why they hover anxiously near the students, practicing tongue twisters with them. “You need unique New York,” they keep saying.