



Brad Cartwright, Maggie Vallegas, Katy Dubina and Noal Cartwright give Carly Bales a lift.

EMP, Baltimore's busiest little arts collective, isn't afraid to 'go weird.'

{ Extremely Magical People }

BY BRET MCCABE

During the last 12 months, Baltimore's EMP Collective has produced more than 40 events, including art shows, stage performances, film screenings and writing workshops. All told, more than a thousand people showed up. "We were really ambitious this first year and we almost killed ourselves," says Carly Bales, the collective's co-founder and artistic director.

"Our programming [philosophy] was 'Let's do everything we could possibly ever want to do,'" jokes producing director Maggie Villegas, who along with marketing director Katy Dubina comprise EMP's founding trio. "And we did."

The name "EMP" isn't an abbreviation for anything ("Extremely Magical People," quips Villegas, quoting one of the stage techs), and its programming is equally open to interpretation. But the unifying streak that runs through all EMP's endeavors is a fondness for the odd and unusual. Its gallery shows have varied from local artist Sara Barnes' cartoon-like mixed-media works, which blend children's book whimsy with adult anxieties, to Washington, D.C., photographer Greg Schmigel's mobile phone-captured street scenes, which brings Garry Winogrand-like urban life into the Instagram age.

Most unusual might be the collective's stage productions. In spring 2012 it produced Austin, Texas, playwright C. Denby Swenson's "A Brief Narrative of an Extraordinary Birth of Rabbits," inspired by an 18th-century hoax in which an Englishwoman claimed to have birthed a litter of bunnies. It's best described as an absurdist play of sexual politics involving puppetry and stuffed animals. WYPR theater critic J. Wynn Rousuck appreciated it, commenting in her radio review, "All the more credit to the EMP Collective and director Elissa Goetschius for finding a way to make the impossible possible. . . . ['Rabbits'] was still not polished, but it earns high marks for chutzpah and oddity."

EMP, which is composed of six core members, all in their 20s and early 30s, is picking up momentum. What started as a loose collaboration between Florida State University graduates scattered around the country became a 501(3)(c) nonprofit organization in 2011. EMP applied for a \$10,000 Operation: Storefront grant from the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, and was one of 10 organizations awarded a grant in August 2011. With help from the Downtown Partnership's Mackenzie Paull, it secured a basement space at 306 W. Redwood St. in December the same year. This October the gallery moved to the first floor of 307 W. Baltimore St., a former shoe factory, in the newly christened Bromo Tower

Arts & Entertainment District. It's a mammoth, 7,000-square-foot space with high ceilings that run the length of the building. The space is bigger, and Bales and her collaborators want to think of ways to use it more effectively.

After running themselves ragged working 14-hour days to mount a production only to start the whole cycle over again after it ended, the collective wants to slow down for the 2012-2013 year. "We were so over-ambitious with everything we wanted to do and did, now we find ourselves in the opposite situation," Dubina says. "We've pulled back and are focusing more on the creation and the process."

The change doesn't mean doing less but creating more. During the collective's first anniversary show, "Exquisite Corpse," a visual arts show that runs through December, EMP unveiled a permanent 6-foot-tall, 100-foot-long mural created by 22 contributing regional artists, who didn't know what the mural looked like until they showed up. They had the unusual exercise of adding to one another's work, sight unseen.

EMP's 2012-2013 calendar also is filled with writing workshops, including its Cans N Drafts series, which the collective hopes to turn into a page-to-stage incubator for playwrights.

Washington, D.C., playwright Liz Maestri started coming to the workshops in early 2012 armed only with thoughts about critiquing what she calls the District's homogenized "condo culture." That seed sprouted into her play, "Condo Condo Condo land," which is still in development. EMP presented an excerpt of it at Center Stage and Maestri and EMP hope to produce it in 2013 in the new space.

"It's the kind of play that I wanted to do with EMP and no one else," Maestri says. "And it came about entirely through Cans N Drafts. I had been coming to EMP's theater stuff and was inspired by what they did. They're not afraid to go weird."

That attitude is what EMP wants to cultivate, both for other artists and the collective members themselves. "We were spending so much time producing things that we weren't focusing on our own work," says Bales, who concentrates on theater. "So this season we're taking a step back and getting ourselves more involved beyond just artistically directing or stepping in for an actor at the last minute. The goal is to focus on the development of new works."

Whether those works are about Englishwomen who conceive bunnies or not. □