



Chloe Bronzan in Anthony Clarvoe's *Show and Tell*, at the new Symmetry Theatre Company in 2010.

JAY YAMADA

## ■ SAN FRANCISCO

# BALANCING ACT

## CHLOE BRONZAN AND JESSICA POWELL ARE BOTH EQUITY ACTRESSES

whose significant others also happen to be Equity actors. As the quartet of friends pursued their careers together, the couples noticed a disturbing fact—the women worked markedly less than their partners and couldn't find enough roles to earn them health insurance.

Beyond the shortage in U.S. theatre—by now widely documented—of female-penned productions and female leading roles, actresses in the Bay Area, where Bronzan and Powell are based, face an additional complication: Many local theatres have funds for only a limited number of Equity contracts, so they use primarily non-union casts. Ask most local casting directors and they'll tell you there are more females than males in the Bay Area acting pool. What that means, of course, is that it's easier to find a non-union actress of high caliber to fill a role. Symmetry is currently conducting a study that estimates that as much as 70 percent of the area's Equity contracts go to men.

To address this disparity, Powell, Bronzan and her life partner Robert Parsons, along with actress Danielle Levin, founded *Symmetry Theatre Company* last year. Part of Symmetry's mission is to give at least as many Equity contracts to women as to men. "We're not strictly a feminist company—we're about balance," artistic director Bronzan explains. "We want to choose plays with male and female characters that are equally developed and relevant."

Symmetry presents its first commissioned piece, *Patience Worth* by Michelle Carter, Sept. 9–Oct. 2, directed by Erika Chong Shuch. The play tells the story of Pearl Curran, a real-life St. Louis housewife who channeled the titular 17th-century spirit. Worth purportedly dictated critically acclaimed poems and novels through Curran, turning both women into celebrities.

"I think of Shakespeare's sister," says Bronzan. "What if Pearl had those words inside her and couldn't be taken seriously, so she created this ghost story? What would it take for a woman of her time in those circumstances to become an acclaimed author?" —*Lily Tung Crystal*

## ■ HOUSTON

# Paying for Painkillers

ITS SETTING MAY BE 19TH-CENTURY NEW England, but Elizabeth Egloff's new play *Ether Dome* is as fresh as last second's Twitter feed.

"Liz has created a huge, epic canvas about the emergence of ether and the patent wars over it in the U.S. And this fundamental debate—should people have to pay for taking away pain?—is one we're still having today about health insurance," says Mark Bly, senior dramaturg and director of new-play development at Houston's *Alley Theatre*, where *Ether Dome* premieres Sept. 9–Oct. 9. Michael Wilson, who's nurtured the play since its commission at *Hartford Stage Company*, directs.

Egloff didn't begin with an epic in mind. Six years ago, Wilson asked her to write a "modest-sized" play about Horace Wells, a dentist who helped develop ether as a surgical anesthetic in the 1840s. In a twist straight out of Victorian melodrama, Wells's hard work was forgotten when his protégé, William Morton, claimed the discovery as his alone.

"As I began to do more and more research, the story became more and more complicated," Egloff says. "It wasn't just about the discovery, but about the battle over what to do with it." The play metastasized into an 11-character saga of greed and betrayal—and the birth of commercial medicine.

Director Wilson says the play touches hearts as well as minds: "It has fascinating characters you become involved with the way you do with a historical soap opera. It feels like an Edith Wharton novel while Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* rages outside." —*Heather J. Violanti*



Egloff

JIM YOUNG

## ■ SAN DIEGO

# ANGRY BUTTERFLIES

## GOVERNMENT OPPRESSION AND

tyranny are likely to produce several byproducts, among them revolution and reactionary art. Julia Alvarez's novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is an example of the latter, written in angry response to Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Artistic director Erika Malone and choreographer Ericka Aisha Moore, both of *Evoke Dance Theatre*, have adapted the book into an original dance-theatre production titled *Las Mariposas* (which runs Sept. 8–25 at *La Jolla Playhouse*). Combining modern dance with text from the novel, the onstage performers transform into four "butterflies" of resistance against dictatorship: Patria, Minerva, Maria Teresa and Dedé. As they participate in the conflict that will kill three of them, the sisters' story becomes symbolic: They represent the harsh conditions endured by countless women around the world living under oppression. *Evoke* will also revisit the origins of the story by touring *Mariposas* in the Dominican Republic in November. —*Diep Tran*