

a woman's journey

Molly Smith//Artistic Director//Arena Stage



Molly Smith. Photo Suzanne Blue Star Boy

BY ALEXIS CLEMENTS

EVEN AT THE AGE OF ELEVEN, Molly Smith was demonstrating her entrepreneurial spirit. Getting together with a friend she had known since third grade, Smith, who was living with her mother and sister in Yakima, Washington, conceived a business called “Dial-A-Dinner.” The idea was that the two friends would cook a different menu each night, and customers could order individual portions to be delivered to their homes.

Smith and her school chum worked out all the details, wrote up sample menus, and even placed an ad in the local newspaper. Then, as eleven-year-olds commonly do, they forgot about it—until a couple of nights later, when the phone rang at Smith’s house. Her mother answered and, when the caller asked what the menu was for that night, Molly’s mother turned to her daughter for an explanation. Smith recalls fondly that, when her mother learned about the business (and the ad), instead of scolding, “She just laughed.”

If eleven-year-old Molly could figure out how to accomplish complicated tasks, perhaps more importantly she felt empowered to accomplish them. This know-how and drive are at the core of Smith’s successes, from that first entrepreneurial venture to her nineteen years as artistic director of the Perseverance Theatre in Alaska, to her ongoing tenure as the artistic director of Arena Stage in Washington, DC.

She was born in Yakima in 1952, a few months after her father died. Her mother, Kay Smith, was a social worker and raised Molly and her older sister with help from their maternal grandmother. Mother and grandmother were both present when Smith realized she was going to make a life in the theatre. The family had purchased tickets to see Robert Goulet in a touring production of *Camelot*. Smith was only six, but she recalls every detail of the evening. “I remember my seat,” she says. “I remember my mother. I remember the light from the stage.” Some children find theatre to be a realm of magic and possibility foreign to their lives. Smith says of her first theatre experience that “It felt familiar.” There was never another career.

Soon after the evening at *Camelot*, Kay gave her daughter a copy of Dare Wright’s haunting book, *Lona, a Fairy Tale*, which featured photographs of a doll that transforms into a woman. Inspired, Molly began taking photographs of her own dolls, and creating sets and worlds for them to act within. Smith remembers that, when the family took out their crèche each Christmas, she would set the scene. She asked questions about the places from which each figure had traveled, and how that affected their position and role in the drama. “I was telling stories—staging—from a very early age,” she recalls.

Reflecting on her years spent at Catholic school, Smith describes herself as a “terrible” student, but concedes that she was good at reading and literature. A favorite anecdote involves a meeting between her mother and one of the nuns at school. When her mother returned from the encounter, Smith could tell she was frazzled—the nun’s report probably had not been an unqualified rave. But Kay turned to her daughter and said, “Molly, one day you’re going to find something that you love and you are going to be incredible at it.”

From her mother Smith learned self-sufficiency and received the encouragement to pursue any path she wanted, precepts that Kay herself practiced. When Smith was sixteen, Kay moved



Oklahoma! (2010–11 season). From left: **Philip Michael Baskerville, Vincent Rodriguez III, Lucas Fedeles, Anton Harrison LaMon, and Andrew Hodge.** Photo Carol Rosegg

the family to Juneau, Alaska, in order to seek career opportunities for herself—a bold act in the late 1960s for a single mother of two.

SMITH ADAPTED TO JUNEAU fairly quickly, but she was already a high-school senior and soon left home for the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. There she studied law and wrestled briefly with the self-induced pressure to enter social work or a related field. But after one year she left college to travel in Europe with a friend. “Traveling is where I feel most free,” she says. “I learn the most when I’m traveling.”

Back at college, she talked to a professor about her desire to start a theatre in Alaska. The idea was not well received, and Smith soon transferred to the theatre pro-

gram at Catholic University in Washington, DC, where one of her classmates was Paula Vogel (they would become life-long friends). Graduation came, and Smith moved on to the American University to study acting, soon discovering that directing was more to her taste. Taking advantage of American’s externship program, which encouraged a student to work in her field while pursuing a degree, Smith took every job she could find in the District’s newly burgeoning theatre scene.

Two of those jobs would influence her career.

The first formative experience was her stint as a drama therapist at St. Elizabeths [sic] Hospital, a psychiatric facility that had famously housed the American poet Ezra Pound after he was charged with treason in

1945. At St. Elizabeths, Smith worked with three populations: “The criminally insane, those with chronic mental illness, and drug addicts.” She says of her experience that it “taught me to be fearless in the rehearsal room,” to never shy away from the emotions and actions that the creative process can arouse.

The second vital job during those years was being a script reader at the New Playwrights Theatre, also in Washington. Started in 1972, New Playwrights was dedicated to producing new work in a city, where, at the time, almost no new playwriting was being performed. Reading scripts for co-founder Harry Bagdasarian nourished Smith’s commitment to fostering new American voices.

Seven years in Washington spent going to classes and working in theatres, and all the while quietly thinking about how she would start her own theatre, once she got back to Alaska.

SMITH AND HER HUSBAND, Billy, drove from Washington, DC, to Juneau, Alaska, with fifty used theatre seats in tow.

In Juneau, Smith immediately began gathering people who could help put together her theatre. Kay introduced her daughter to Kate Bounds, who worked in the Department of Health and Human Services and had been both a director and a stage manager.

At a hot dog stand one day, Molly met a "fisherman and a scholar" who became the theatre's lighting designer.

Another company member came from an improvisation class Smith was teaching. "I thought it would take about five years to start the theatre," she says. "It really happened in about five months."

The new theatrical team did not waste any time. As they sat at her grandmother's round oak table, Smith made sure the group kept two things in mind: first, get the name

and address of anyone who came to see the performances; secondly, inaugurate the theatre with a production that highlighted the theatre's unique mission. "I felt that the artistic focus needed to be something distinct," says Smith.

Pure Gold, which opened Smith's Perseverance Theatre in 1978, was created from interviews that the company conducted with Alaskan "old-timers" who had rich stories to tell. Aimed at a young, newly arrived generation of Alaskans, *Pure Gold* was a hit from the outset and went on to tour the state. The production, which Smith staged, was not only the theatre's first success, but also showed audiences that this new theatre could contribute meaningfully to their lives. To this day, the Perseverance Theatre's mission remains the same: create professional theatre largely by and always for Alaskans.

Smith went on to direct other successful productions at Perseverance, always seeking work that spoke directly to her audience, always committed to developing new plays. Her old friend from Catholic University, Paula Vogel, came up to Alaska numerous times during Smith's tenure. Indeed

Perseverance commissioned and premiered *How I Learned to Drive*, which went on to win Vogel the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

During the nineteen years she led Perseverance, Smith built a life in Juneau and eventually a national reputation. So it was perhaps inevitable that she would be offered opportunities to direct on larger stages, and in the late 1990s the search committee designated to find a new artistic director for Washington, DC's venerable Arena Stage, offered Smith the job.

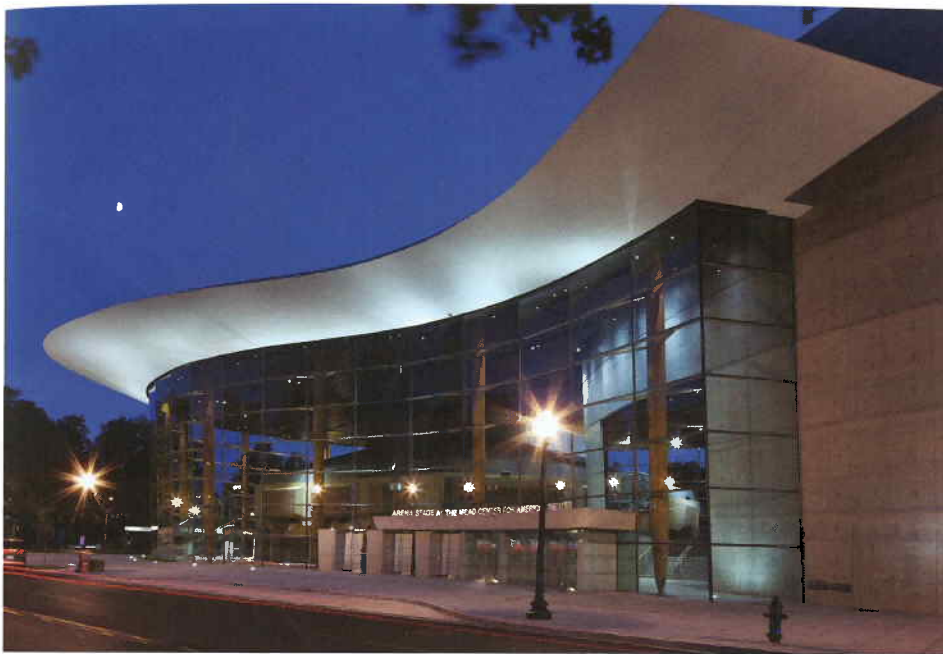
Nineteen years after she crossed the country transporting a load of used theatre seats, Molly Smith left Alaska and returned to the city on the Potomac.

Arena Stage had been founded in 1950 and, like Perseverance, had been led for many years by one person, Arena co-founder Zelda Fichandler, who headed the theatre for four decades.

Fichandler was an articulate and powerful force during the formative years of the country's regional theatre movement. Under her guidance, Arena became the first major non-profit theatre to transfer a show to Broadway (*The Great White Hope* in 1968). The award-

The Book Club Play (2011). From left: Tom Story, Kate Eastwood Norris, Eric M. Messner, Ashlie Atkinson, and Rachael Holmes. Photo Stan Barouh





Exterior of the Mead Center for American Theater. Photo Nic Lehoux courtesy Bing Thom Architects

integrated theatre in the District, and the first to create audio descriptions for the hearing-impaired.

But as sometimes happens with institutions, they become a bit set in their ways. When Smith took over with the 1998-1999 season, she was tasked with reviving Arena's somewhat staid reputation and shaping the theatre's future. And that she has done.

More than a decade after Smith's arrival, Arena has hit a new stride. In addition to renovating the two existing theatre spaces, Smith has added the Kogod Cradle, specifically intended for developing new work. Arena's Mead Center for the American Theater, which opened in 2010 and binds all three of Arena's theatre spaces within a single structure, serves as a physical manifestation of a major shift in the theatre's mission. Previously Arena had centered much of its energy on producing European classics; Smith has redirected the focus toward American classics and new American work.

In line with this new focus, and thanks to a Mellon Foundation grant, Arena has established the American Voices New Play Institute, which supports residencies for playwrights and fellowships for producers. Arena has also created programs like Think Tank, which includes the New Play Map, and the innovative Theater 101, which seeks to educate and engage audiences during the play development process (this particular effort is based on a similar program at Chicago's

as the leading partner for the NEA New Play Development Program, which aims to recognize and support play development across the nation.

As beautiful as the new building is, and ambitious though the new programs are, there has been some criticism of the re-born Arena. There is concern in some quarters about where the institution will find the funds to sustain the Mead Center's sophisticated structure and additional activities. In tandem with this concern is unease about whether the programming will shift to blockbusters such as the Center's inaugural production, Smith's revival of *Oklahoma!*, which returned last summer for an extended run.

But Smith remains steadfast in the face of the occasional negative. She believes that, without these changes, Arena would not have a vigorous, ongoing life. Her choices for the new building have been smart: not increasing the total number of seats, despite having added a new performance space; focusing on a shared lobby, to bring different audiences together and interest them in productions they might not ordinarily consider seeing.

Intensifying Arena's commitment to American work is part of Smith's resoluteness. "There's a mistake often made with a new building," she notes. "One can't just do what hasn't been done before. There has to be a deepening of the artistic mission."

LOOKING AT THE ARC OF Smith's career,

what comes to the fore most clearly is the woman's ability to set a goal and achieve it. "I've failed big in my life and I've succeeded big in my life," she says, "and all it's done for me is shown me different ways to go."

She recognizes what this sense of purpose has enabled her to do. "I have it within me to organize people toward common goals," she states. Over the years that single-mindedness has allowed her to build teams that trust her and have faith in her instincts. And it is these groups—groups of different people with differing perspectives—that she says have helped her achieve "exponential success" at both Perseverance and Arena.

Smith is refreshingly candid about the path she has chosen and does not shy from the opinion that women achieving "balance" in their lives is largely a fallacy for people in her position. "There's a lot of sacrifice," she confesses. "There's sacrifice as far as my family is concerned, there's sacrifice with my friends, sacrifice with myself, in order to be able to really focus in this way. I can't help but focus in this way; it's how I'm built. But there is collateral damage. And that's what I don't think people realize. You have to make the choice that this is something you really want, because it's hard. People can make it look easy, but it's hard to do all this work."

In addition to citing her mother's influence, Smith credits Alaska with giving her the courage to make choices. "I think," she says, "if people don't realize when they look at me as an artist, as an artistic director, that I come from Alaska and that I carry that inside of me, then they don't know who I am. Alaska is where I gained enormous strength." Every summer she returns there, spending one month at the cabin she shares with her life partner, Suzanne Blue Star Boy.

Above all else it is clear that Smith sees in her work the potential to affect not only individual lives but also the larger society. That personal sense of mission underlies everything she says and does. It is also the strongest indicator that, despite having accomplished so much, there is still a great deal more for Smith to do.

ALEXIS CLEMENTS is a playwright, performer, and journalist based in New York City. She recently co-edited a two-volume anthology of plays by women, *Out of Time & Place*, which you can learn more about at www.alexiscllements.com.