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Photo: Lisa Kraus

Summer Savory: Mt. Tremper Arts' Alchemy of Art and Food

by Lisa Kraus

My introduction to life at Mt. Tremper Arts (MTA) was through its kitchen. As a summer volunteer, the moment I changed into work clothes after the drive up to New York's Hudson Valley I was tasked with chopping, table setting, plating, and carrying food out to tables on the grass seating 32 guests.

And what food! Ratatouille with layers of vegetables from the garden, each layer prepared to draw out its flavors most intensely, fresh corn Mexican-style with a chickpea mayo, fresh coriander and queso fresco, and much more. Each dinner at Mt. Tremper Arts was cause for what we volunteers termed not gluttony but aesthetic delectation. In another life I might apprentice myself to Ethan Knechel, the chef.

Why such emphasis on foodie pleasures? It has everything to do with the origins and intentions of Mt. Tremper Arts. It began after New York visual artist Mathew Pokoik and dancer Aynsley Vandenbroucke purchased a fixer-upper house on a hillside in Mt. Tremper, a quiet Catskills hamlet. He had summered in the area and attended Bard nearby. After a few years of improving the property, Pokoik was hit with a "let's put on a show!" inspiration, envisioning a seven-week summer series of performances. With their lovely new barn studio and connections to a wealth of artists, they opened the series eight years back. With the aim of supporting experimental work and the development process, they counted on a gang of friends to heave-ho and make it happen. How to keep everyone happy, and provide a gracious time each day for coming together for conversation and exchange? Food.

In the summer Mt. Tremper Arts has a regular administrative and production staff, a changing group of artists in residence each week and a clutch of artist-volunteers who assist with performance-related tasks (concessions, ticket taking, etc.) as well as gardening and kitchen duty. Most stay in the original main house, while some rented cottages and two airstream

trailers on the land accommodate the rest.

I chose to be there during the residency of ICE, the [International Contemporary Ensemble](#), who performed David Lang's [Whisper Opera](#) as directed by Jim Findlay. Lang's music—atmospheric, mysterious and lyrically brilliant—has always appealed to me, and Findlay caught my eye for having worked a lot with the Wooster Group and staging last year's compelling *Dream of the Red Chamber* where viewers of the all-night spectacle were encouraged to slide into reverie, or sleep, during the performance.



detail of the set for *Whisper Opera*

The brightest early morning sound on the land was the warm-up of ICE's flautist. Each of the musicians could be heard practicing during the day. The show itself, which had been in development several years before at MTA and was returning after touring to a variety of locales, was staged with gauzy fabric "walls" separating the performing space into eight chambers. True to title, the piece is intensely quiet. Lang posed four Google queries, most about relationships, and grabbed text from the web. The resulting language, whispered by all performers—soprano, flute, clarinet, percussion, and cello—as they shift from one chamber to another throughout, conveys intimacy. It's a read out of our collective humming innermost thoughts.

Audiences for Mt. Tremper's experimental work have grown gradually, nurtured in part by creating an exceedingly welcoming environment. Before the show, patrons stroll through the gardens. They sip beverages, available for purchase. And following each show they mingle with the artists around the fire pit, pictured below, where s'mores supplies are at the

ready. There are occasional community “Art-B-Q’s” (their spin on barbecue) for patrons.



Some Philly-affiliated artists (like Devynn Emory with a crew of PHL dancers) have benefitted from the year round residencies taking place when the summer series concludes. With a roster of music, theater and dance, and occasional visual art installations, Pokoik stays busy on the programming end for upcoming MTA seasons, looking at work in New York where he estimates seeing three to five shows each week.

Fulfilling its aim to counter the prevailing commodity-based “product” orientation in performing arts, the spirit at Mt. Tremper Arts is at once fertile, playful, serious, and delicious.

Mount Tremper Arts Summer Festival, July 11 - August 22, 2015, <http://mounttremperarts.org/>

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