# The Other Theatre wants to creep you out

by RACHEL LEVINE

If not for their baroque language, American sci-fi/horror master H.P. Lovecraft's eerie tales of forbidden knowledge, the irrelevance of human morality, altered states and inherited guilt could pass for contemporary works. His writing has inspired countless artists, among them Stacey Christodoulou, artistic director of Montreal's The Other Theatre, who found inspiration in the stories' ambience and ability to question the nature of reality.

"We wanted to do a creepy, weird show," Christodoulou says. "So we figured that the worst thing that could happen to a person was that your kid disappears and you don't know if she's alive or dead."

That was the root of her latest production, *love u lovecraft*, a play that follows an unfortunate mother, Clara, who has lost her daughter—only Clara's past might be to blame.

"Clara comes from a dysfunctional family in the '70s and goes out into the woods to escape," Christodoulou explains. "While there, she tries out different kinds of divinations and believes that she can make things happen by communicating with nature."

Allison Staton

Then she adds, "But how real is that?"

"The audience never knows if she's channelling something," Christodoulou says, "Is she crazy or is it something supernatural? Is she deluded or not? Is she taken over by the forest? This is the sort of thing that happens in Lovecraft all the time."

Christodoulou explains that the forest is a character in the show itself. "Forests have a mystical nature," she says. "There's an ecstasy and horror to the forest. When you go out in the woods, it's cool until it gets dark.

"The thing about Lovecraft is that he really enters into your bones," she explains. "I was at the beach last summer with friends and I thought I'd just hang back and read some Lovecraft. I had to put the book down because I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. Not a lot happens, but a slow psychological terror takes over. The things you think you know, you don't really know. You think things are innocent, but maybe they're not. It's like that short story 'The Lottery.' You sense the lack of normalcy behind the normalcy."

With this production, Christodoulou is presenting the show as a week-long public lab. It turns the audience into beta testers, allowing the company to see how well the show works. "This way we'll have time to tweak it before its official run in November," she says. "But don't expect five actors rolling around on stage in their sweats reading a script. It's pretty complete. It's an elaborate piece."

The advantage, of course, is that audiences can give feedback and effect the final production.

"It becomes like a science lab for us," says Christodoulou. "We mix things, experiment and present it to the public."

The actors were brought together for the show as needed. "One actor and I started putting things together last year. People became part of the cast bit by bit," she says. This allowed her to bring together a cast that has the right balance and energy.

"I spend a lot of time thinking about how to make casts," she says. "You have to cast for strength and balance. Masculine energy and feminine energy. The personas of the actors. It's like having a great band. It's not about the best, so much as the best collaboration. The group has a chemistry."

Ultimately, Christodoulou wants the audience to have an experience. "We created this show for an audience to be transported. We want to engage people's emotions and immerse them. You come into our creepy divination world for this incredible little ride. You think, 'Wow, what the hell was that?' Then you think, 'Let's go get a drink.' It's like going to the woods and telling each other scary stories. Once you've had enough, it's time to split.

"Everybody loves a creepy little story.