

# IN THE NAME OF HYBRID THEATER

Two unconventional performing-arts series—one from The Warhol, the other from the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust—more than live up to their billing.

BY JUSTIN HOPPER

Corey Dargel seems constantly on the verge of an unexpected revelation: a skeleton in his closet, a secret he's sworn to keep, an epiphany he's beheld. But, just as he does in his performances—song cycles (a group of songs performed in a sequence as one) comprised of visionary pop music staged with cabaret tinges—Dargel pulls away at the last moment. It's what makes his music so fascinating: that sense of mystery that keeps his performances imbued with as much Beckett as Beck.

Take the show Dargel will deliver as part of The Andy Warhol Museum's *Off the Wall* series this November. Titled *Removable Parts*, the acclaimed song cycle speaks about people interested in, of all things, voluntary limb amputation. (Body Integration Identity Disorder is a real psychological disorder in which people feel uncontrollably drawn to amputation.)

Even in the always-quirky context of *Off the Wall*, it's safe to say that *Removable Parts* stands out. Dargel's work does, however, share a common root with many other *Off the Wall* shows in that it includes the most Warholian of all art standards, portraiture.

Few artists would approach such a subject. Fewer still would take Dargel's approach: He gives his audiences access to a set of characters with this bizarre obsession, but then cuts that portrait short, just as they've passed the initial recoil.



Peter Reder, Corey Dargel, and Taylor Mac will deliver genre-bending performance art to Pittsburgh.

"The show has a sense of not wanting to give the audience too much personal information," says Dargel. "There's a tension in the performers—they open up and then shut down. The mysteriousness of it, the fact that these people talk to one another on the Internet behind the veil of anonymity, that's interesting to me—that these people have such strong feelings, but aren't able to come out and say so in public."

Since its inception in 2000, *Off the Wall*—which this year includes seven performances from September to November—has been dedicated to keeping Pittsburgh in tune with genre-bending, performance-based art like Dargel's. It's a mission bolstered this year by the simultaneous staging of the second-ever Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts, a city-wide, 16-day performing and visual arts festival featuring exclusive U.S. premieres by international artists and contemporary performing-arts companies. First staged four years ago to coincide with the 2004-05 *Carnegie International*, the festival was a collaboration presented by The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and Carnegie Mellon University. This time, curatorial duties have been shared by Paul Organisak, vice president of programming for The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, and Ben Harrison, The Warhol's associate

curator for performance, to help give the festival's run a good balance.

"The Trust has expertise with a variety of big-production performances," says Harrison, "work that's appropriate for a 1200-seat theater. But given their larger venue options, they're not as focused on a lot of smaller, hybrid, performance-art work. They thought that was something we could bring to the table."

Peter Reder's *Guided Tour*, presented jointly by *Off the Wall* and the Festival of Firsts October 13-15, is just such a piece. In this guided adventure, Reder will take his audiences on a tour of Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History, and his conversations will spiral into tangents that form something of a self-portrait of the Londoner's life.

"I like approaching big, historic places and adding things from my own life," says Reder. "It's important that *Guided Tour* fulfills the requirements of a regular guided tour. So I'll introduce people to the building—who built it, why, the architectural features—but then begin to mix in my childhood in the London suburbs, which is something I think American audiences can really appreciate. There's a common heritage there about suburban living; that experience of anonymity."

Portraits of anonymity blurred with grandiosity and fame: If Reder's *Guided Tour* sounds conceptually similar to Dargel's work, consider *13 Most Beautiful*, Ben Harrison's curatorial triumph that will stage its premier during the Festival of Firsts. It's a selection of songs written by underground-rock icon Dean Wareham and his partner and bandmate, Britta Phillips, to accompany 13 of Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*, his four-minute film portraits of, as Harrison puts it, "people in the art world, musicians, celebrities, quasi-celebrities, anonymous people—just about anyone who came through The Factory."

The collection of songs, performed in front of the projected films, will debut October 24-25 at the Byham Theater, and the project is expected to travel extensively afterwards. The idea has been rattling around Harrison's head for years, and seemed a perfect match for the festival. Harrison approached a few musicians he knew from organizing the museum's eclectic music series, and it was Wareham, one-time leader of the bands Galaxie 500 and Luna, who responded most enthusiastically. The result is a new performance commission that's been developed in collaboration with Geralyn Huxley and Greg Pierce from The Warhol's film and video department.

Wareham's style—atmospheric and somewhat melancholy pop songs, heavily influenced by Warhol compatriots The Velvet Underground—also fits the project perfectly. And his popularity fits into another mission that Harrison, and performance art in general, seems to be embarking on: Using independent music's current cache to garner a new audience for the hybrid theater performance.

"Particularly in the past five years, there's a lot of what people might call 'punk-rock theater' happening in the performance-art scene," Harrison says, "experimental theater done by people who mostly haven't necessarily studied theater or music. It's organic in that 'let's-make-a-show' spirit. The music component can give it a different energy and a broader appeal, and I'm happy about that." ■

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For a complete schedule of *Off the Wall* performances, check out [www.warhol.org](http://www.warhol.org). For more information about the *Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts*, visit [www.pgharts.org](http://www.pgharts.org).