

[Whose Last Show Is It, Anyway?](#)

By Laura Collins-Hughes

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A meditation on mortality and renewal, “The Following Evening” presents mirror images of two married pairs of theater makers.



Ellen Maddow and Paul Zimet, both at right, collaborated with Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone on the new play “The Following Evening.” Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

Outside the big, tall windows of Ellen Maddow and Paul Zimet’s Manhattan loft, in a former garment factory on Mercer Street in SoHo, is a slice of the New York skyline: up close, rooftops of old brick buildings, solid as can be; farther off, glass towers — taller, sleeker, colder, newer.

In a city forever in flux, Maddow, 75, and Zimet, 81, have stayed put for half a century, creating experimental theater in the skylighted boho oasis that cost \$7,000 to buy in 1973, and where they raised their family.

Having arrived in the neighborhood when it was scary-scruffy, long before it went way upscale, they have remained stubbornly devoted to each other, and to their venerably niche downtown company, [Talking Band](#), which turns 50 this year.

That kind of history can sound utopian from the outside. But misunderstanding is a risk they're taking, cautiously, with "[The Following Evening](#)," a new play in which they portray slightly fictionalized versions of themselves, in slightly fictionalized versions of their lives.



Scenes from a performance: A rehearsal of the work, which is a collaboration between two theater-making couples a generation apart. Photographs by Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

“Does this all sound romantic?” Zimet asks rhetorically in the show’s prologue, where he reminisces about the past. “I really hope it doesn’t.”

And yet, how could it not? Maybe especially to younger New York theater artists like Abigail Browde, 42, and Michael Silverstone, 43, better known as the duo 600 Highwaymen. Creators of the inventive pandemic trilogy "[A Thousand Ways](#)," they have spent their careers navigating a theater landscape that lately has shifted unnervingly.

“The Following Evening,” which they wrote and directed, is a meditation on mortality and renewal, art and evanescence, embrace and entanglement. Running through Feb. 18 at the Perelman Performing Arts Center, where Browde and Silverstone perform opposite Maddow and Zimet, it presents mirror images of two married pairs of theater makers. Scenes of dialogue are interspersed with stylized movement.

“In the beginning,” Silverstone said, “Abby and I were really contemplating the intimacy of Paul and Ellen, really exploring physically a lot. Watching them work together, and making dances for them.”

Maddow recalled: “They interviewed us a lot, too. There was one time where you had to do the whole story of your life while doing some movement that went on for about three hours. It was fun.”

The couples share a rare commonality. Browde described it as “this very weird, dense overlap of what it means to be not only a theater artist in this specific lineage and community, but also to live in such a strange domestic experience,” where there are “no hard edges” between work and life.

It was a Saturday afternoon in January at the loft, and they had just run through “The Following Evening” for a small invited audience that included two dogs — Maddow and Zimet’s glossy Ava, ebullient in the front row, and Browde and Silverstone’s tousled Pablo, lounging on cushions just offstage.

Afterward, as the four humans sat around the kitchen table, that experimental lineage was a bright thread through the conversation: when Zimet mentioned the reading he’d just done with Taylor Mac, Talking Band’s old pal; or Browde noted that she’d taken the choreographer Annie-B Parson’s class three times as an undergraduate at New York University; or Silverstone explained that he and Browde became interested in Zimet when he performed in a workshop of David Byrne’s “Theater of the Mind” that they collaborated on, in 2017 on Governors Island.



"The Following Evening" has been a work in progress since 2018. Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times



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Consciousness of that experimental, downtown tradition glimmers in “The Following Evening,” too, as when Zimet refers to “Joe” — [Joseph Chaikin](#), the founder of the influential Open Theater, where Maddow and Zimet met.

The play has been in progress since 2018, when Talking Band commissioned a work for Zimet and Maddow to perform. Back then, Browde said, she and Silverstone were feeling depleted, and a little jaded, after too many months on the road with their shows. So the impression they got, being in the room with Maddow and Zimet, struck them profoundly.

“These are people who have lived through multiple cycles of change in their lives, in their work, in the city,” she said. “They aren’t cynical. You don’t feel that there’s callous scar tissue. These are people who have a tremendous amount of hope, energy, optimism, and have all these shows planned out.”

Indeed they have, with two more premieres coming up downtown: [“Existentialism,”](#) directed by Anne Bogart, from Feb. 23-March 10 at La MaMa, and “Shimmer and Herringbone,” in May at 122CC, a production that will also include Tina Shepard, the third founding member of Talking Band.

It is, then, a bit misleading that the marketing copy for “The Following Evening” tugs at the heartstrings by calling the show “an intimate portrait of two artists creating what may be their final performance together;” beneath a photo of Maddow and Zimet. That truly is an idea that has percolated through the show, but they don’t identify with it.

“Every time you brought that up,” Maddow said to Browde and Silverstone, not unkindly, “we’d say, ‘Could you take that out? Because we don’t want this to be our final show.’ Don’t even say that. It’s like bad luck.”

Talking Band, as it happens, sounds more sanguine about its future than do 600 Highwaymen. Browde and Silverstone are still bruised by what they said was the cancellation, by a major New York City theater, of a production of “The Following Evening” that was to have opened last April. (They are legally prohibited from naming the theater, they said.)

“The fact is, we have nothing lined up,” Silverstone said. “We have no new work. We have nothing beyond this. When we started, we thought that we were making this piece about these two people who were making their final show, and yet it actually ended up being about us: Is this our final show?”



The work is a tribute to theater, and the people who are devoted to it. Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

More narrowly, the question might be whether it is their last show made in New York. They are thinking of leaving Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, next year for a town in France that could be what Silverstone called “a next place of inspiration.”

New York, in Browde’s view, is “not doing great at holding on to theater artists,” in part, she believes, because it no longer supports theatrical development as it once did.

“And, you know, we work in theater,” she said. “So of course I think that things that are fleeting are beautiful, but also there’s something lost when each generation just is like lemmings off the cliff.”

For both couples, a lot of life has happened in the years that “The Following Evening” has been in process. Browde and Silverstone — symbiotic now, but genuine enemies, they say, when they were N.Y.U. undergrads — had a baby who has become a toddler; Maddow and Zimet gained three grandchildren; Zimet had a bicycle accident that worked its way into the show.

And [the \\$500 million Perelman opened on the site of the World Trade Center](#) — its dripping-with-wealth glamour as different as could be from the Talking Band aesthetic, but a form of regeneration anyway.

Zimet frets less about the health of the city and the theater than he does of the world, which he believes has grown dire. On his list of worries are “the end of democracy, the climate collapsing, what it’s going to be like for our grandchildren.”

But as he and Maddow prepare for their other show “Existentialism,” he said, he takes comfort in a line from Sartre: “There may be more beautiful times, but this one is ours.”

Maddow added: “It’s the only one we’re going to get.”