

American Strippers Heads to Attleboro



The “outrageous cosmic comedy,” *American Strippers*, by Rhode Island’s own Kevin Broccoli, received its world premiere as the final production of Epic Theatre Company’s 2015 season. It’s a bawdy but intelligent fantasy, where Greek goddesses throw a bachelorette party for Aphrodite in a Texas strip club run by American legends such as Pecos Bill and Johnny Appleseed. A lovesick cowboy threatens to derail the marriage to Apollo, and Dionysus shows up to literally raise a little Hades. More than just an exercise in culture clash, (as if *Magic Mike* fell into *Back to the Future*), the play blends fable, myth, song, dance and traditional theater to form a unique experience. Powerful dramatic monologues slot neatly beside male striptease and the outright silliness of overheated deities shares space with salient commentaries on American history and the relationships between people. (See *Motif*’s original review here: <http://motifri.com/americanstrippers2015/>).

After its successful Rhode Island run, *Strippers* went on to the following year’s New York Fringe Festival with an only slightly modified cast, a continuation of the play that Broccoli hoped to repeat locally, if given the opportunity.

Now, a revamped production of *American Strippers* is set to open in nearby Massachusetts on February 16, presented by Attleboro Community Theatre. Broccoli is thrilled to see his script mounted once again, and this time around he has handed over the reins to a completely different artistic team and a fresh cast. *Motif* spoke with the show’s director, Megan Ruggiero, about the differences between the original incarnations of *Strippers* and ACT’s version, as well as the challenges of producing such an edgy piece in the safe confines of a local community theater.

Motif: In casting a show that has already had a run in Pawtucket as well as a mostly similar cast in the NY Fringe Fest showing, were you hoping to use any of the original actors, or were you looking to start fresh?

Megan Ruggiero: I have a tremendous amount of respect for the original cast of *American Strippers*, and I admire every single one of them. While I was open to casting original cast members and most were aware of the auditions, I didn’t want to actively recruit any of them because, as an actor myself, I assumed that Kevin’s *American Strippers* was a special experience that could not be replicated. I didn’t want there to be comparisons. I was hoping to start fresh in Attleboro with some regulars and attract a new talent-base as well, and I accomplished exactly that. My cast is the perfect balance, and they are working incredibly hard to meet and exceed my high expectations for this groundbreaking production.

Motif: The play demands a certain amount of diversity given the nature of the characters. Did you openly seek actors of color? If so, what difficulties, if any, did you encounter?

MR: As a community theater, I feel it's important to cast as much of a show as possible with the actors who take the time to prepare for an audition and show up. Luckily, I was able to do that with the 30+ actor pool who participated in our auditions. Admittedly, that pool was not very diverse and tends not to be in Attleboro. With that being said, I was able to cast the absolutely brilliant Court Stafford in the role of Apollo, who I didn't want to pigeonhole into playing Mr. Henry (John Henry) of folklore fame just because he is an actor of color. Court's mannerisms and delivery were precisely what I wanted in my Apollo. It is necessary for the pivotal role of Mr. Henry to be played by an actor of color. I sought out the equally brilliant Jay Are Adams, who I worked with at Epic Theatre Company on *Red Speedo* this past fall, to play that role, and rounded out my cast because I knew Jay would give me the cool and collected power I need in Mr. Henry. I am also proud to say that my lead dancer and choreographer, Carlos Gutierrez, is not only dedicated and talented, but is also of Mexican descent. I am hoping that having a higher degree of representation in this cast will bring in a new and diverse audience to our production.

Motif: Are you making any nods toward the original staging/choreography, or are you ignoring that for a fresh take?

MR: I saw Kevin's *American Strippers* in November 2015, and though I walked out of there saying to myself that I had to direct that show someday, I honestly didn't remember too many details when I sat down to plot out my own version almost two years later. There isn't sharable footage or too many photos available of the original to reference, and it was also produced in a smaller, black box environment. Just the nature of having a larger proscenium-style stage over in Attleboro lends itself to a very different production. There are certainly nods to the original in some of the costuming, dance numbers and monologue delivery, but my overall concept is unique and fresh, especially the much more complex set (we installed a stripper pole!). It's still important to me that we capture the intimacy of the original, and we've found creative ways to do that in a larger space. No spoilers!

Motif: What speaks to you about this script?

MR: Kevin has an enviable gift for telling stories that are highly visceral and intellectual at the same time, and *American Strippers* is no different. The script is beautiful and captured me from the get-go where a stereotypical "welcome to America" strip number is juxtaposed by a sweeping monologue from Johnny (Johnny Appleseed) on aging, loneliness and loss of identity. Beyond the words themselves, these mythical figures are humanized effectively throughout the script as unexpected elements of each character's personality and history are revealed (a Pecos Bill who reads and writes poetry, a slightly introverted Athena who is afraid to share her feelings, etc.). This theme of "the unexpected" I take a step further in the staging, set and dance numbers. I want the audience to have preconceived notions about what this show is going to be and have them do a complete 180. As an avid theater-goer myself, there is nothing I love more than being completely surprised and delighted.

Motif: What do you see as the biggest challenge in staging this piece?

MR: The ACT audience is just not the same as Epic's or Mixed Magic's, which is where the original production was staged. The ACT audience is on the more conservative side and not exactly used to cutting-edge theater. However, we recently staged *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *The Man from Earth* in the same season, and audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive. I knew we could push the envelope

even further. My challenge has been finding a line of comfort that will still open audiences' minds, but not have folks walking out the door a few minutes in. It was very important to me that I did not alter the script in any way, but the staging and movement is perhaps "safer" in some areas. My production crew and I have found fascinating ways to pay homage to the risqué material in artistic and meaningful ways that are right for our core audience base. I haven't felt restricted, and I think that's important to the overall integrity of the piece.

Motif: Anything else you'd care to add for our readers?

MR: I just want to say that my cast is a dream come true. Every single actor is committed to making the characters their own, exploring every layer and consistently bringing fresh ideas and moments to the stage at every rehearsal. I've been working with ACT for four years now and have never seen such focus and drive, and part of that is because Kevin has crafted a true ensemble show. I'm inspired every day by all of them.

Attleboro Community Theatre presents Kevin Broccoli's American Strippers. Performances will be held at the Ezekiel Bates Masonic Lodge, located at 71 North Main Street in Attleboro. Performance dates are February 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, and March 2, 3 and 4. Friday and Saturday evening performances are at 8pm, and Sunday matinees will be at 2pm. Tickets can be purchased at the door or online via squareup.com/market/acttickets. Senior and student discounts apply at the door or online. For tickets, call 508-226-8100 or email: AttleboroCommunityTheatreACT@gmail.com