

Let Justice Roll: Stages of Freedom programming illuminated Benefit Street



There are many things that people don't know about the country's smallest state. There is one area code. It's called Rhode Island, but there are 30 islands in the state. There were more than 1,000 slave ships that came through Rhode Island, many documented in the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. There is jazz at the new Yoleni's on Tuesday nights with Mibbit Threats. There is the Michael Van Leesten Pedestrian Bridge. There have been 25 annual Langston Hughes Community Poetry events.

And there is Stages of Freedom.

Teachers, scholars, students, humanitarians, activists, writers: Take note.

Like many gems, knowledge about Stages of Freedom often travels by word of mouth. A time saver for the curious is to ask what Stages of Freedom is not.

Stages of Freedom's offerings are breathtaking. It encompasses a book store (10 Westminster), a museum that has on display "Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge" and "Rare Letter from John Brown regarding the sale of Slaves," an event space featuring "Freedom Factor," live performances, youth empowerment workshops, historical walking tours, swimming lessons for youth, events celebrating our shared history, speaking programs, exhibits on black life and culture, concerts, bow-tying workshops,

tea parties, and free swimming lessons for the luckiest. The list goes on.

There is a packed schedule on their Facebook page, including this Saturday's Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine. They are justifiably proud of the 5th annual *And Still I Rise*, which happens at the First Baptist Church in America. Some will attend not because they know it is a tribute to Maya Angelou and more by great Rhode Island women, but for an excuse to get an inside glimpse of this gorgeous landmark. This church and meeting house was founded in 1638 by Roger Williams, built in 1774, and became a National Historic Landmark in 1960.

A brilliant event graced this space on February 23. It was called *Let Justice Roll: An Original Cantata Celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr* by Mark Miller. There couldn't have been a more beautiful setting for the power and dignity that ignited Benefit Street in Providence that day. The light cascaded upon the musicians, choir and presenters like heaven was illuminating history. Young people greeted hundreds of people as they entered the establishment with unforced manners and authentic kindness. There was celebration in the air, and the seats were comfy.

Ray Rickman, executive director of Stages of Freedom, delivered a gracious welcome, qualifying that he tried not to produce the event because, as he explained, the organization is preoccupied with raising one million dollars to sustain free swimming lessons for Rhode Island youth. He talked about bow ties. He spoke of tea parties and the importance of teaching youth specific skill sets.

Thank goodness the lyrics for "Birmingham Sunday" by Richard Farina were in the program to distract the weeping listener, or rather, to clarify to the less versed appreciator the depth of the sentiments. The sheer subject matter of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that killed four girls and injured 22 others was tear jerking. The dynamic delivery by Becky Bass, Stephen Martorella, Geoffe Greene and the absolute angelic choir transcended truth. When a full congregation joins together and looks in the same direction, art happens. Miracles happen. History is revered.

From 1963, The Letter from Birmingham Jail was delivered by a diverse 10 presenters, including Stages of Freedom program director Robb Dimmick, Rhode Island icon Dr. Rose Weaver, Robert DiMuccio (chairman, president and CEO of Amica Mutual Insurance Company) and Darius Henderson Jr. (a student at Jacqueline Walsh School for the Arts). The letter, a major artifact from the Civil Rights Movement, stands out with some of the most famous Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quotes. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

On this day, because of the stellar lineup and placement of the readers in the presentation, King's reference to explaining the atrocity of racism to his own children let the bells of sin ring. Channeling the deep well of injustice, Rose Weaver read how Dr. King had to explain to his 6-year-old daughter "...

why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television...Funtown is closed to colored children." A father tries to explain while a Civil Rights Leader attempts to school his own oppressors.

Stages of Freedom is a goldmine of opportunity. For more information, visit its Facebook page, go to stagesoffreedom.org, or visit its museum and store. Or simply donate. Stages of Freedom has announced plans to share video of Let Justice Roll.

25th Annual Langston Hughes Community Poetry Reading: If you had been there. "...you would know why"



Emily Ruth Hazel, honorary poet;
Photo credit: AIJ Media

The sounds of steel pan, keyboard, bass and vocals poured out of the Providence Career & Technical Academy Auditorium as hundreds of standup citizens glided inside. They were there to hear 67 people present Langston Hughes' works, as well as experience some surprises.

Many attendees returned for a third or 20th visit. Sylvia Ann Soares was presenting for the 12th time in 21 years. She said she was "delighted to see the varied ethnicity reflected in Langston's poems performed by immigrants and others in their language besides English." There were beautifully dressed children tuning in and out of the tribute to the poet. There was a touch of harmonica, some snapping,

singing, drumming, some blues ... and due to careful listening and collaboration, at one point we could hear the "Seascape. "

The event began from the moment one walked into the door, greeted by volunteers of all ages who were professionally welcoming. Old and new friends shook hands and hugged, families milled together, and six generations warmed the auditorium. Deborah Spears Moorehead performed the Opening Song. "A prayer that came to me at 4am," she explained before blessing the space with "A Prayer for the People."
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One of the quintessential "community" moments took place next. As April Brown and Valerie Tutson prepared to lead "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," there came the sound of a stunning 10-month-old baby. Tutson said, "Joya wants to sing the Negro National Anthem," and she held her baby on stage as the entire congregation sang along with them.

A Biographical Moment, Rochel Garner Coleman first dazzled the crowd by quipping that he thought the preceding invocation was going to be "Ain't No Stopping Us Now." Later, when he quoted Hughes, some reflected on the moments of collective guffaws. "Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it." This day was one of celebration of Hughes, and it included laughter, joy, pain and contemplation. Rochel described Langston Hughes as "the original jazz" and the "JZ of Harlem." He gave a detailed list of the vocations and let the listeners know that Langston Hughes was far from just a poet. Rochel eloquently wove wit and knowledge, including the ominous question, "What would [Hughes] think of immigration issues, 1994 Rwanda Genocide..." [Langston Hughes lived on earth until 1967.] All the while, Rochel's voice and the instrumentals played in tandem. This was an eloquent and thorough account of Langston Hughes delivered with a passion usually reserved for eulogies. This was a birthday party.

Many were curious to get to see and hear the Honorary Poet, Emily Ruth Hazel. She had performed the previous night for Funda Fest's event "Grown Folk Story Telling." She submitted to the RFP from Pasadena, California. The next 67 poems (plus Hazel's) were presented in three different categories. The turnout for an authentic community, in the truest sense of the word, emulates much of what Langston Hughes celebrated in his writing. April Brown explains, "There is an elegance, because of the time period he represents. I wanted it to have a very spiritual component to it."

As can be expected, not every presenter was able to attend. If Ray Rickman were there, it would have been his 25th year presenting. It seems that most people, once they know about the event, attend, dare it be said, religiously. Sidney E. Okashige couldn't believe that she had never heard of the event. "Why didn't I know about such an amazing event?" Well, someone told her, and that someone is writing this article. Spread the word. For those who are a little down or need to reboot their spirits, this is a sanctuary where all faith can be restored. "The power of Langston Hughes' writing," as musician Becky Bass stated, along with the inclusive community mentality, were ways in which the Langston Hughes

Community Poetry Event is to be revered. There were 10 languages represented onstage, ages from one to ageless and dedicated teenagers who represented their age group with dignity and confidence, executive directors and teachers, visiting artists and families with small children and grandparents, donors and volunteers.

Emily Ruth Hazel talked about how “If you don’t show up, there will be an empty place” and the gentleness of being “swaddled” and how to “practice listening.” She writes about how she “waited to be chosen last” and about “high-profile and highly profiled.” She talked about America and how “you’re welcome here” and an “America still worth singing about.”

As in “Words Like Freedom,” by Langston Hughes, read by Sheila Jackson, it is in our best interest to read these poems, to talk about them, and to listen to them.

A Furtive Movement: The Use of Farce



Providence has the honor of hosting RISCA Play and Screenwriting Merit Award winner Vatic Tayari Kuumba as a resident — possibly a permanent one, according to Kuumba, who is dedicated to our little state. Kuumba has a prolific writing record — from school newspapers to award-winning rap competitions that send him all over the US. He also is the performance coordinator for AS220 Youth, and is working on a large body of work, in literary installations, for the stage.

Furtive Movement: The Use of Farce, is the first in a series of what could be 10 productions from that large body that will portray the 21st century from 2000 until just before 2999. About this first

movement, Kuumba explains, “*A Furtive Movement: The Use of Farce* is set in an alternate future that parallels our present, where over one thousand people are killed by the police every year, told from the perspective of one of the victims of the state, whose death inspired protest, riots and the formation of a black billionaire super PAC that funnels dark money.” *Furtive Movement: The Use of Farce* will run June 7 and 8 at 7pm as part of PVD Fest, and Jun 10 at 4pm and 7pm at the Pell Chafee Performance Center, 87 Empire St, PVD.

FUTUREWORLDS 4: The Goddess, the Cat and the Trap House is a multidimensional performance that begins to tell the intertwining stories of three creatures developed by the young artists at AS220 Youth. As the story goes, each creature of god has played an integral role in destroying what human beings have created: systems of oppression. *The evening takes place on June 9 from 5 - 10pm with the main show starting at 8:30pm. The main character of the CAT was created with guidance and support from BIG NAZO LAB.*

ECAS Theatre Glamorously Introduces Mayor Elorza and PVD Fest 2018



If you weren't one of the hundred or so recently at the highly acclaimed ECAS Theatre, rubbing elbows with Mayor Elorza, Firstworks and PVD Fest's 2017 grand marshall Francis Parra (and founder and executive artistic director of ECAS Theatre), surely you've heard about the big plans for PVD Fest 2018.

When Mayor Elorza took the microphone at the event, his enthusiasm was contagious. Because he stood on stage at a theater whose company consists of native Spanish speakers, Mayor Elorza conducted his PVD Fest announcements in Espanol. He relied on the promotional photo to emphasize the inclusivity of the event and the importance of it being free, and to express appreciation for the sponsors, who were named on the photo. If the humans featured in the photo were present, they might have felt special as

Mayor Elorza pointed specifically to their expressions of pure elation. His most emphatic moment was when he called the audience to arms. He explained that there was a goal to break the Guinness Book of World Records by having the largest BACHATA dance event at sunset on the opening night of PVD Fest 2018, and he asked that everyone in the audience bring four friends. Mayor Elorza is absolutely gracious and eloquent in his public speaking.

Mayor Elorza introduced FirstWorks executive director, Kathleen Pletcher, in that gracious manner, saying that the City of Providence and FirstWorks arrived at the concept of PVD Fest at the same time and agreed to collaborate. Mayor Elorza congratulated Pletcher and FirstWorks before Pletcher introduced the director of culture and tourism, Stephanie Fortunato. Fortunato emphasized the BACHATA challenge, the growth of the festival and the importance of spreading the word about the festival. She gave major air time to the talents of Lizzie Araujo, who has a legacy in Providence as a phenomenal organizer and producer.

ECAS Theatre, where the event took place, is currently in rehearsal for *La Criolla*, written by Melida Delgado and directed by Jhompby Ventura. ECAS shows are frequently sold out to a standing ovation audience. For Rhode Island visitors and locals equally, ECAS Theatre is a haven for culture, class and kindness.

PVD Fest 2018 runs June 7 - 10, with the BACHATA Guinness World breaking event starting at sunset on June 7 in Kennedy Plaza.

Happy Birthday, Langston: The Community Celebrates with a Reading



(Photo (left to right): April Brown, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, Bernadet Pitts-Wiley, Karen Allen Baxter, Angela Nash Wade.
Photo Credit: Kathy Moyer)

It was Super Bowl Sunday, but the cool kids were hanging out at the Providence Public Library.

Sunday, February 4, marked the 23rd Annual Langston Hughes Community Poetry reading. All the way up on the third floor of the downtown library, there is a gorgeous auditorium that is especially toasty warm on a rainy, winter day. This is where hundreds of Langston Hughes fans gathered to celebrate his birthday. The cool kids were the total of 54 presenters and performers, including a three-piece jazz band.

Everything was a highlight, particularly the sapphire blue dress that must have been tailor made exclusively for April Brown, co-coordinator of this event (Kai Cameron is the other well-dressed co-coordinator). In fact, everyone seemed to be decked out in their Sunday best. Langston Hughes (born James Mercer Langston Hughes) would have been pleased. He also would have been 116 years old. There was birthday cake, but maybe that many candles weren't allowed in the library. Most people weren't there for the cake. The cake was frosting on the inspiration, wisdom and strength.

The event began with opening remarks, including informative words from guest scholar Dr. Renee T. White. She guided the audience through her understanding that calling Langston Hughes by just his first name was actually a sign of respect. Dr. White shared, "Langston helped me understand things my parents had said." She paid him homage saying that after she discovered Langston Hughes, "...through Langston, I discovered myself."

The program began with music and finished with music. Angela Nash Wade awakened the spirits of the upstairs library and brought the audience to its feet. A talented trio revered each and every presenter with reactive jazz. Daniel Ian Smith, John Baboian and Keala Kaumeheiwa provided the perfect jazz accents to Langston's poetry. It was interesting to see all of the different ways in which the performers quickly negotiated and/or requested certain sounds before they read. At one point, 32nd on the program, Kaumeheiwa brought his acoustic bass to the podium. Langston probably would have loved this depiction of Dream Boogie.

Most of the presenters signed up exactly one year ago at the 22nd annual event. It was intriguing to see the different levels of familiarity that the audience had with the individual presenters. Forty poems were read with three additional special presentations. Dr. Renee T. White also shared a poem. The event was built into three separate sections: Speak Truth to Power, Let Your Motto Be Resistance, and Dream Variations.

Because most of the presenters were behind a podium and reading off the page, the live music and the vocal variations were distinguishing elements. Julia S. Jordan-Zachary flowed with the jazz. Yamil Baez took an animated approach. Yon Tande's peacefully sparkling smile added depth to the poem "Man into Men." John Baboian inserted a comedic spin. Catalina Martinez delivered the poem "Sweet Words on Race" regally and with a sharp level of energy. Sylvia Ann Soares, who received special cheers from the crowd, read "America" with a heightened level of seasoned commitment and grace. Rob Dimmick whispered "Aunt Sue's Stories" like a lullaby to an onstage, colorfully clad Ramona Bass-Kolobe. When Karen Allen Baxter took the stage, there were shrieks in the audience. Her delivery of "Let America Be

America Again” was polished with conviction. And Margaret Connell milked the words “warm manure” from “Un-American Investigators,” much to the delight of the giggling audience.

If there were a voice built just for the oration of Langston Hughes’ body of work, it might be Pell Award Winner Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. His voice carried the catharsis of the Harlem Renaissance with the power of the Civil Rights Movement. He was the guest performer, so he treated the audience to three impeccable deliveries of Langston Hughes’ work. As an added treat for the audience in the finale of the event, Pitts-Wiley invited the Mixed Magic Exult Choir to the stage. If there were a dry eye in the house after 44 profound poems, four intriguing speeches, and an exquisite jazz band, this beautiful choir was there to change that notion. “Give Us Your Peace” was personified in its glory by Pitts-Wiley and the Mixed Magic Exult Choir.

This program was made possible through the Providence Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, and a grant from the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, an independent state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is just one of the hundreds of enchanting offerings by the Providence Public Library.

The Liar’s Contest by FUNDA Fest at Mixed Magic Theatre



Photo Credit: Dhana Whiteing of All About the Photos

For the 20th year, the RI Black Storytellers hosted and produced a Liar’s Competition on January 19 as part of FUNDA Fest, sometimes referred to as RIBS’ Fibs. The event was hosted by April Brown and Teju Ologboni, and played to a standing-room-only crowd at the Mixed Magic Theater at 560 Mineral Spring Ave in Pawtucket.

Many of the contestants were returning winners competing to add another trophy to their collection. Some participated in prior years and were still striving for a big win. Four judges (Dhana Whiteing, Raffini, Don Mays and Donna Osborne) were assigned the task of judging each performer by originality, creativity, the relative TALLNESS of their TALL tale, delivery and audience response (which counted for 30% of the score). Half of the judges stated for the record that the scores were very close to one

another at the end of the night.

After April Brown and Teju did some housekeeping with endlessly sharp banter, visiting poet Ilene Evans graced the stage, followed by Teju's opening story (was it truth or was it a lie?) about jazz and Fifi La Femme. The rules were explained and the 20th Liar's Competition began.

One by one, contestants took command of the room. Many of the lies seemed outrageous and credible at the same time. Each lie was unique and each performer was skilled at delivering a fine lie.

Catalina Martinez began the evening telling about her Grandmother Dulce from Cuba who used to soak her teeth in holy water. Martinez attested that she knew, for a fact, that this was true because it was Martinez, at a young age, who used to go to the church and steal the holy water herself. This wasn't that far-fetched, yet the audience knew that some or all of it was a lie. This first story about Agua de Dulce was so well-received, that one had to wonder if it might have won for best lie if it hadn't gone just a little bit over the 5-minute mark (scores were dropped 5 points for every minute over). Martinez provided a phenomenal jumpstart into a fast-paced evening.

From there, one of the winners from last year, Josh, announced that he was going to tell the truth because lying didn't work for him. His tale of wearing his Batman onesie with a cape to do the polar plunge escalated to the question, "How can I get everything wet without getting everything wet?"

Paul Hossfield, a retired engineer, began his lie by saying that he was God.

April Brown kept the audience on its toes with clever quips. She introduced the next act reading off the card, "He says he is young at heart. Now, see, that's something men say." Mark Binder then shared the very believable story about Old Scratch Nichols and the Bloated Chicken Challenge. This story brought the audience to knee slapping and tambourine playing when they heard about a three-times dead politician who had to be killed by a taxidermist (and others) to enhance his work ethic.

Rusty Monty told a story about gold digging before and after the Civil War.

The youngest liar of the group was 14-year-old Haley Roche. She was overheard telling an audience member that her account of making one friend on the bus and not being weird or awkward in the 3rd grade was true. She held her own on stage and it seemed like a lie that it was her first time on the Liar's Contest stage.

When Marvin Novogrodski took the stage carrying a rolled-up brown paper bag, one of the good-hearted hecklers called out, "He brought dinner!" Little did the audience know, the bag was filled with underwear. His lie involved meeting up with FUNDA Fest creator, Valerie Tutson, sharing coffee and ideas, and ultimately agreeing to sell signed underwear from all of the various and talented RI Black Story Tellers. It didn't seem like a lie that they agreed that the underwear be clean, as he stated. During his brief (as it were) 5 minutes, Novogrodski pulled out allegedly signed tightie whities such as, "Put some Tutson on your butson. Love, Val" and "Put this on your ass. Love, Ramona Bass." All of this lie seemed like a logical way to subsidize FUNDA Fest. Who wouldn't buy a fancy pink undergarment signed, "I like them teeny. Love, Raffini"?

Next on the bill was Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. With his purple voice and his engaging physicality, it was easy to forget this was a contest. Pitts-Wiley is the kind of performer who does not lie on stage. Perhaps he was just telling someone else's truth. He and Bernadet Pitts-Wiley are the founders of Mixed Magic

Theatre, a haven of integrity and reliably engaging programming.

Burr Harrison entered the stage in an argyle sweater, taped-up glasses and hiked-up jeans. He delivered his lie in a high-pitched voice. It made one wonder if the words were true, but the delivery was a lie, or if Burr blurred the lies together.

Cassandra Cato-Louis, author of *How to Marry a Black Man*, skillfully tricked the audience in her account about how her mother never met Isaac Hayes.

Then Jim Roche, who may or may not have worked on Wall Street, told a story about his encounter with someone who turned out to be an international spy ... maybe.

Once all of the contestants finished, Masankho Banda performed a bonus story. He is a visiting story teller for the FUNDA Fest, and one of the many talented presenters over the last couple of weeks.

Then there was a raffle. The top three winners were announced. Third place went to Mark Binder, second place to Marvin Novogrodski (who flung his prop underwear to enchanted audience members en route to his prize), and first place was awarded to Burr Harrison.

Audience members chatted enthusiastically afterward. They enjoyed the lovely Mixed Magic Theatre space and discussed their plans for upcoming FUNDA Fest events. One might expect a review to limit itself to the highlights of an event, but with FUNDA Fest, every single offering is a highlight.

Shakespeare to Hiphop Engaged and Educated Audiences



Credit: TKphotographers.com

Shakespeare to Hip Hop is a 90-minute show that is appropriate for all ages and introduces attendees to William Shakespeare with a three-piece band, incredible beats and a brilliant comedy duo. For the last four years, the show has been touring Boston public schools as well as some private schools and libraries. Most recently, it performed on January 14 at the Southside Cultural Center as part of FUNDA Fest where it brought down the house (for more on FUNDA Fest, visit motifri.com/funda-fest-2018). The piece uses both authentic, old-school Billy Shakespeare and cleverly written lyrics by Marlon Carey and Regie Gibson. The show finale involves audience members of all ages leaping from their seats and dancing to the beats onstage.

Shakespeare to Hip Hop is described by Carey and Gibson as "...The Bards of the Beat Drop/ Coming in with rhythms and/ slick literary what-nots/Kicking many lyrics and then/ rocking out in workshops/ Trying to make it known that/ literature is HOT."

WBUR 90.9 FM, NPR Radio Boston, reports that the show is aimed toward a younger audience, but the show is riveting and hilarious and appeals to all age groups. At the most recent performance, the youngest person in attendance was born in June 2016. There were also people there who may have gotten a senior discount ticket price.

The January 14 evening began with the legendary Raffini doing everything anyone would need to add a skip to their step and warmth to their heart. She sang, she hosted and she made magic with her ability to see and hear everything around her, mix it all up on stage and throw it all back at the audience without the audience even realizing that she was just giving them a taste of their own yummy medicine. Raffini introduced Vatic Kuumba, a poet and playwright who also runs AS220 Youth. Kuumba performed one of his polished pieces, "What Are You Waiting For? The War Is Raging Now."

Then Kuumba introduced Manami Braxton from the AS220 Youth. Braxton, a brilliant writer and performer, delivered “Give Me A Minute” and stunned and educated a house full of enthusiasts. Raffini quipped, “... spirits in the house, the table fell, the noise happened, we ain’t doing libations.” Raffini brought a wisdom to the room that did not escape a single soul.

By this point in the evening, the set-up was clear: It was the Academy Awards Night in Providence and the next presenter would be the biggest celebrity of all: Ramona Bass. Famous storyteller Valerie Tutson (and creator of FUNDA Fest) introduced Bass and her legacy as a pioneer of *Rites and Reason*, a part of the Africana Studies Department at Brown University. It was Bass’ birthday. “I’m old enough to say I’m old enough,” she said before explaining that she is a story wheeler, who keeps telling and sharing stories. Her story preceding *Shakespeare to Hip Hop* began, “... you know how it is when you live underwater? Not many people come to visit you.” Bass earned a standing ovation and later, a birthday cake.

Speak Easy and *Shakespeare to Hiphop* began with the band onstage: keyboards, drums and Alison Keslow on the bass. Then “Robin Hoodfellow” and “Horatio Everyman” listed endless idioms and metaphors to enlighten the audience that they were already “quoting Shakespeare.” In one swell musical swoop, the audience learned Shakespeare was born in 1564, his name was spelled about six ways, his marriage license had some clerical errors and that he had eight children. They made Shakespeare seem like the coolest dude to ever exist.

Carey and Gibson might happen to be entertaining, but they also were talking about truth. And that made the performance really stinking funny. In fact, *Shakespeare to Hiphop* is a full out lesson in literary appreciation. The show is a condensed, but not CliffsNotes, demystification of intimidating literature. Carey and Gibson’s technique engages the audience, and when they discover that they understand Shakespeare, their confidence builds.

Shakespeare to Hiphop is also philosophical. The MCs sing “Get Married and Have Kids Before You Die?” explaining how most parents would like their children to do certain things at a certain age. During the Shakespeare Smackdown, Oberon schools Nick Bottom for trying to steal his wife. The audience falls to pieces with laughter as the characters use words only to have full-out battle. It is a hilarious depiction of silly teenage drama.

Carey is a model for how the best actors are the reactors, and his nuanced onstage listening is a lesson for all performers. He sings, he rhymes, he performs, and his pure intention onstage is to keep the audience engaged.

Gibson asked the audience if anyone knew about unrequited love and what it was. Of course all knew, but not everyone admitted it. Just in case, he explained, “It’s when you like someone but they can’t stand you.” He and Marlon Carey asked everyone to hold their phones up and show the light if they knew the feeling. Audience members participated. It was very funny.

In a quick interview with Carey’s 10-year-old daughter Adelaide, after she watched the show for the first time, she said she noticed “happiness and joy” on the audience members’ faces during the show. She noted that the audience was “engaged, entertained, and not bored.” She was especially fond of how well *Shakespeare to Hiphop* lured the audience in with “controversy.”

Excerpts from Shakespeare to Hiphop were performed in Rhode Island at the Providence Fringe Festival and the Wilbury Theatre Group at the Waterfire Arts Complex last July 2017. For more information and to learn about future performances, visit shakespearetohiphop.com

REVIEW: Luna Loba VIII Moon of Floods: Part 2

Luna Loba VIII is, "Performance art, sound, body/voice, video. Female + gender neutral artists exploring home, water, flood, cleansing, destruction, the act of building, deluge, flow, connectedness, generosity, roots, force, violence, safety, arrival, departure, movement, borders, spaces of in-between, to overflow."

Audience members can expect the unexpected because Luna Loba is hosted at AS220 Blackbox, where anything can happen ranging from an operetta written by children (Manton Avenue Project) to a giant dinner party with the servers performing, rollerblading and throwing food across the audience seated around the giant table.

There are some consistent aspects of Luna Loba, which has been a highlight on Empire Street since January 24, 2016. First, it is an evening divided by numerous stellar performers. On this seventh installation, there were so many interested artists that the evening had to be divided into two parts. The first part coincided with the November full moon. This was the beaver moon, and the invited performers were inspired by the building of homes and setting roots in volatile conditions, politically and environmentally. Connoisseurs of the Luna Loba series might follow certain recurring performers, but they know that the individuals are never predictable. Shey Rivera, AS220 artistic director and curator of Luna Loba, is discerning in her choices for performers. She brings on the best, the riskiest, the bravest, the most innovative, and the most globally conscientious.

Second, an audience member can expect there to be a full house. The audience is a combination of smitten and supportive performers, surprised and appreciative acquaintances of the line-up, and unsuspecting theater goers. Third, when the audience members enter the space and see tech pro Kimberlee Beggs at the helm, they can expect a well-run show (albeit fresh from the oven) with the calm and ease of something put on by true professionals.

On the December performance I attended, the evening began with musician Laila Aukee, who is part of the Providence-based band Sugar Honey Iced Tea. Aukee's piece built musical ambiance with a loop, and was well-received by respected musicians in the audience.

Soon, Joan Wyand, who had been literally camped out on stage left during the entire show, enters the stage. Wyand is an award-winning performance artist who was featured at another fascinating event at AS220: a fashion show directed by International legend Guillermo Gomez-Pena. Wyand is also a spirited activist who keeps New Englanders on their toes and fights the good cause. Wyand illuminated quotes on the screen such as, "I spoke up for myself" and, "Don't feel bad about someone else's drama."

Mary Kim Arnold, recipient of the RISCA fellowship in fiction, perched stage center sewing in front of moving images of the Korean War. Her piece, "(Re-)Dress: One for Every Thousand," stunned the crowd into thoughtful silence.

On screen, Lilliam Nieves was smart and intriguing as she joyfully tried on a variety of iron-sculptured crowns. She could have reigned in any one of them. Nieves welded the materials from broken gates in Puerto Rico. Nieves' work reflects on both beauty and sovereignty.

“Grief,” a video with vocalist and performer Anqwenique Wingfield, was so beautiful and soprano that many viewers might have expected the glasses full of water showcased in the scene to break from the power of Wingfield’s voice.

Muggs Fogarty appeared as Sweetpea Pumpkin, delivering a carefully crafted piece that one can only hope to hear again and again.

And then there was Marleny Luna. This poet/performer offers the audience the quintessential labor of navigating between her charm and beauty juxtaposed with the cerebral punches she throws. She is like a helicopter landing at sea, checking for the aerial view, and landing with precision. Marleny Luna lures the audience into listening intently, then reminds them not to stop working.

Then the audience witnessed many of the reasons Medusah Black received a “Making An Impact” award from Rhyme Culture Rhode Island. She had full command of the stage and gifted the audience with her adrenaline and talent.

Also featured in this revolving and evolving series: Corinne Wahlberg, Rose Jermusyk, Liz Oakley, and Julie Mallis and Kimberlee Beggs at the helm of the sound booth.

What can one expect from the next Luna Loba on January 8? There is something for everyone. There will never be the same roster, but there will always be a fascinating, extraordinarily well-crafted and curated, rich evening of profound artistic interventions. It is the type of event that makes people proud to live in Providence, and brings visitors flocking to Rhode Island.

It Does Mean a Thing: Providence Swings



Photo Credit: Tom Hager and Robert Hatcher

There is only one thing that makes Rhode Island a swing state and it isn’t controversial. Providence Swings, a non-profit organization, is where the swinging takes place.

Based out of Lincoln, Rhode Island, Providence Swings is part of a Lindy Hop revival that has “lasted

longer than the original dance craze,” according to Susan Glatzer of 2017 film *Alive and Kicking*. This film, in theaters since April, depicts the history of swing dance, where Swing Queen Norma Miller credits the music for dancers’ ability to excel at the kicks, spins and lifts. In an interview with NPR, Norma Miller modestly explains that people associate her with this dance era because she has “outlived all of the dancers from that period.” She, like all active swingers from Rhode Island to the West Coast, is adamant about keeping this genre of dance alive. The film references dancers who have gone off their anti-depressant medications as a result of dancing, and who swear by swing dance as a way of life. On an historical scale, swing dance, and specifically, the Lindy Hop, are credited for bringing the US out of The Great Depression during the Harlem Renaissance. So it stands to reason that Providence Swings can hurl joy into individual lives in New England.

One can start off with a sneak peek by watching the all-female dance troupe Divine Providence and the Rhody Hoppers (aka Lil’ Rhody Lindy Hoppers of Providence Swings) at the Sweet Little Variety Show on June 8 at Aurora at 8pm. If you’re busy that night, head to the weekly Bread and Butter Jam at 85 Industrial Circle in Lincoln. On that night, the Lindy 2 class begins at 7pm, then there is the Bread and Butter Jam that begins at 8:15pm.

One can feasibly have one’s cake, butter and jam, and eat it, too (especially with all of the calorie-burning exercise) by going to Sweet Little Variety Show on June 8, then to providenceswings.com to sign up for a Tuesday or Thursday class, then to the Bread and Butter Jam at the headquarters in Lincoln or at the Narragansett Towers on August 3 with Lloyd Kaplan. The event at Narragansett Towers is described as a field trip for the weekly Bread and Butter Jam, which begins with a beginner lesson from 7-8pm at 35 Ocean Road, Narragansett. Then there is outstanding, energizing, inspiring, knee-slapping, toe-tapping music by Lloyd Kaplan all night.

For those who missed seeing the Providence Swings recent performance at WaterFire, there is an excellent opportunity to enjoy them on July 15 when Divine Providence performs a half-time show for the Providence Roller Derby game at Thayer Arena in Warwick. It will be exciting to see how two very different genres of hearty exercise — roller derby and swing dance — complement one another. Other weekend events scheduled at Providence Swings are the Moonshine Rhythm Club (September 9) and the Live Lindy Harvest (November 4) also with beginning lessons and live music and dance throughout the night.

- Weekly classes regularly Tuesdays and Thursdays at Providence Swings: 85 Industrial Circle, Lincoln.
 - Weekly Bread and Butter Jam Thursdays at Providence Swings: 85 Industrial Circle, Lincoln.
 - Providence Swings performance at Sweet Little Variety Show, Aurora, Providence, 8pm June 8.
 - Providence Swings performance at Providence Roller Derby Game, Thayer Arena, Warwick, July 15.
 - Bread and Butter Jam field trip at Narragansett Towers, 35 Ocean Rd, Narragansett, August 3. Beginner classes from 7-8 pm, live music and dance all night with Lloyd Kaplan.
 - Moonshine Rhythm live music all night, September 9 at Providence Swings: 85 Industrial Circle, Lincoln.
 - Live Lindy Harvest, Providence Swings, November 4, 4-9pm.
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Rhode Island's Sweet Little Variety Show

"All the world is a Sweet Little Variety Show and all of our LGBTQ friendly humans merely feminist, anti-racist, queer-positive, body positive players in a cabaret," to paraphrase William Shakespeare.

Aurora in DownCity PVD demonstrates their commitment to diversity and acceptance as host venue for the Sweet Little Variety Show, one of the biggest hits in Aurora's programming, held the 2nd Thursday of every month since 2009. General Manager Chrissy Wolpert was quoted in *Motif* last month saying, "It's incredibly important to everyone at Aurora that people feel safe to be, hear, and feel at Aurora."



Vatic Kuumba performs as a poet at the Sweet Little Variety Show at Aurora PVD.

(Photo: Ian Silvia)

The Sweet Little Variety show offers enthralling music, poetry, stand-up comedy, swing dance, ventriloquists, band music, the Lil' Rhody Lindy Hoppers, hula hoopers, magic tricks, the Moist Towelettes, burlesque, a mentalist, and even the Extraordinary Rendition Band have popped in to play. Sometimes the SLVS coincides with Aurora's full schedule of Bourbon nights, karaoke, and DJ hosting.

Erin Olson, a comedian known at SLVS for Garden City Biddies with Steve Dionne and now pursuing her craft with iO and Second City in Chicago said, "SLVS has always been unique for me because it offers the opportunity to engage with a vibrant and diverse audience that has proven time and time again to be smart, enthusiastic, and incredibly receptive."

The minds behind the Sweet Little Variety Show understand that the best performances are enhanced by the positive energy between stage and audience. Jen Stevens, one of the three producers since SLVS's inception, agrees. "Nicole [Maynard], Meg [Sullivan], and I work together to curate a diverse show across multiple genres. We like to encourage artists to experiment, and we bring a mix of new and returning talent. We've developed a really friendly audience that's open to just about anything. Every show is full of pleasant surprises."

The fabulously functional blend of Aurora's and SLVS's philosophies relaxes audiences right away. The performers, often returning over the years, look forward to it. Singer-songwriter John Fuzek is a SLVS staple after eight years. "Sweet Little Variety Show is a lot of fun," he said. "It is a loose show with a lot of heart ... Meg and Nicole keep you entertained with all sorts of straight-up talented folks..."

One of the “loose” shows, the Lil’ Rhody Lindy Hoppers “Jive at Five,” was as loose as it gets. Providence Swings offers weekly beginner-friendly social dances called the Bread and Butter Jam. “We find that Sweet Little Variety Show is a wonderful example of a venue [Aurora] that values inclusivity, artists from all walks of life, and a place that fosters community and warmth, which is what we try to do with Providence Swings,” said Vivian Madrid.

It’s not just SLVS’s dedication to pay each performer that elicits loyalty, and the performers of SLVS benefit from watching and supporting each other at the shows. Often the performers bring their own audiences, further developing the collective vision of Aurora, Sweet Little Variety Show and the welcomed guests.



Wild Cat, the RHD-RI band, performs at the Sweet Little Variety Show at Aurora PVD. L-R: Brian Mustari on guitar, Amy Rostkowski on drums, and Nissah Armstrong on vocals. (Photo: Ian Silvia)

At the March 16 show, MC “Nicool” (Nicole Maynard) introduced the Resources for Human Development of RI (RHD-RI) band Wild Cat, which consists of Nissah Armstrong on vocals, Amy Rostkowski on drums, and Brian Mustari on guitar. Armstrong immediately took full control of the stage. “We are friends with some staff members at RHD who approached us about having Wild Cat, the RHD Band, perform,” Maynard said.

Armstrong and her band, according to Jen Stevens, “... totally stole the show at their first SLVS performance! We look forward to having them back one day.” Meg Sullivan, as one of the team of SLVS producers, added, “That was probably one of my favorite moments in SLVS history so far.” In addition, Wild Cat will perform at 8pm on April 8 at the Parlour in PVD for the A is for Awesome benefit for autism.

The Sweet Little Variety Show rocks Aurora, 276 Westminster St, PVD, every 2nd Thursday of the month. Guests planned for the April 13 show include musicians Jacob Haller (“He sings about kitties and robots. He’s amazing,” said Maynard) and Mark Molloff, Stuart Window doing stand-up, excerpts from *Horror*, burlesque with Bettysioux Taylor, Jasmine Packard performing poetry, and hula hooper Jessie Jewels. Cover \$7 to pay the artists; 18-plus unless accompanied by an adult.