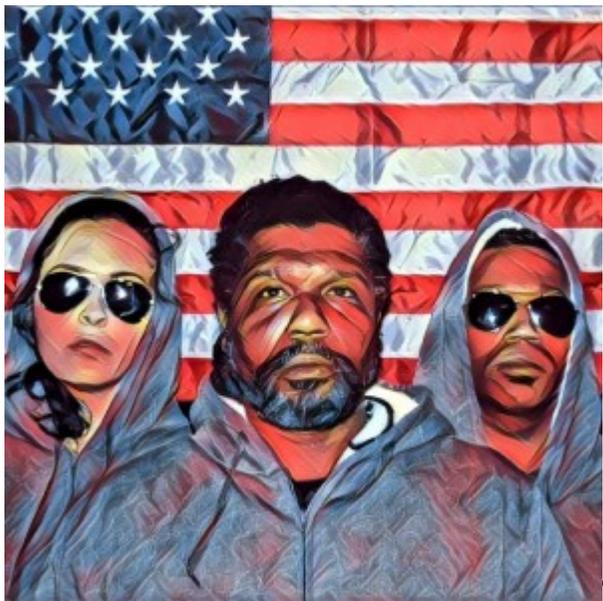


## Big Ideas at Wilbury

By the end of the talk back following the Friday night performance of *New and Dangerous Ideas*, it became abundantly clear that the audience members who were convinced they understood the content of the play still had a long way to go on the path of enlightenment.

Race is a tricky subject. Conversations about identity and culture can quickly become uncomfortable, especially from the vantage point of privilege. However, in a social climate of division and racial scapegoating, a play like *New and Dangerous Ideas* is the perfect device to start meaningful dialogue and to provoke change in long-held worldviews.

Christopher Johnson's *New and Dangerous Ideas*, despite what you may have heard (or read) is not a controversial play. It does not strike too close to home. It is not in-your-face, nor does it go too far. It's a mirror; it's the truth. It's an hour-long meditation on the systematic injustices that people of color suffer every day in the United States from the perspective of the victims themselves. If that's cause for you to take offense, you need to take a long, hard look at what type of human being you are.



The show is a collection of poems, monologues, skits, videos and Facebook messages that amount to a constantly engaging experience. There isn't a dramatic arc in *New and Dangerous* in the traditional sense, but the variety of content keeps the story fresh. You never quite know what's going to happen next. At one point, two actors don whiteface and perform what is ostensibly a reverse minstrel show, detailing five stories of white privilege in the face of the law. The actors then remove the whiteface makeup and tell the stories again, only this time the races are reversed, and the outcome is tragically different.

The set is spare and minimal and creates an atmosphere of possibility. Cinderblocks line the perimeter of the stage and cryptic messages are scrawled all over the black walls of the space. You get the sense you're in Christopher Johnson's head, the writings of a prophet all around you.

It's a fitting backdrop to a play that is fundamentally about the words. There are big moments of theatricality, sure, but a lot of this show involves listening and absorbing the details — particularly of the monologues.

The cast is up to the task of navigating this tense subject matter, on their own and as an ensemble. Phoenix Williams has the audience in the palm of his hand as he recounts an encounter with police. Sarah Leach is similarly captivating in a monologue about wrestling with caucasian identity (being white, but not white enough). And holding the reigns, Christopher Johnson sets the pace of the play, culminating with an intense, mesmerizing poem in which he affirms, "I don't think all white men are devils/ Just the ones who turn Black boys into angels."

The talk back following the show is an integral part of the experience. There's no shortage of opinions after a play like *New and Dangerous*, and the talk back provides a chance for a very homogenous audience to engage in conversation about race, which they might not be provided with in their lives otherwise.

The content of this play shouldn't startle anyone. If this show makes you upset, or uncomfortable, it is likely a major red flag as to your own white privilege. Maybe we have an idea that we come to the theater to relax, maybe to be taken on a journey, like reading a good book.

Nah, son.

Theater should challenge you. Theater should cause you to confront the limits of your comfort zone. *New and Dangerous Ideas* isn't a play in the traditional sense, but it's a good piece of theater, and a necessary one in these turbulent times.

If you want Rogers and Hammerstein or Neil Simon when you come to the theater, that's fine. You deserve to be entertained with something familiar and comfortable.

But I want plays that are different. I want plays that are new and dangerous.

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## **The Odeum gets Epic: Epic Love Stories Premieres in East Greenwich**

Rhode Island has lost some killer venues. The Living Room, Perishable Theater and Black Rep/Aurora just to name a few. You're just getting to know the place, and then, blammo; closed forever. So, it's encouraging, if not a little unexpected, to hear about a venue making a comeback with live theater.

This weekend, Epic Theatre Company is staging the first piece of theater at the Greenwich Odeum since it reopened in 2013. It's an opportunity not only for Epic to explore a new space, but also for the East Greenwich and the West Bay to attract the Rhode Island theater scene.

The Greenwich Odeum is an historic venue. It was built in 1926 as a vaudeville theater, then converted to a full-fledged cinema, screening films until it closed in 1990. The vigilant efforts of local organizers resuscitated the space in 1994, but in the wake of the Station tragedy, strict fire codes forced the

Odeum to close once again.

Flash forward to 2017.

The 400-plus seat space is undergoing renovations and another hundred seats are expected to be added to a new balcony. Though the Odeum still screens films, programming is mostly focused on live music with the occasional standup comedian. But what would a vaudeville playhouse be without some live theater?

Epic Theatre Company is banking on an anthology of new monologues to make live theater a mainstay at the Odeum. Their latest show, *Epic Love Stories*, is an exploration of the trials and errors of romance and the gushy stuff.

Monologue shows are sort of Epic's bread and butter. It's something artistic director Kevin Broccoli does especially well. Each monologue was composed for a specific performer, and each piece comes from Kevin's forthcoming book, *To Cleopatra on her 16<sup>th</sup> Birthday*. Expect laughs, hot takes on famous historical figures and a showcase of Kevin's acerbic and inappropriate, yet heartfelt, writing.

With many Rhode Island theater companies still nomads without a home, it's important to establish more viable options for performance space. And it's important to have Rhode Island theater companies in East Greenwich. But there are logistical concerns to the Odeum hosting a resident company any time soon.

There are, actually, lots of constraints to being a resident theater company at a live music venue (re: Aurora, Burbage). For example, rehearsals are especially tough. But one-night-only shows like *Epic Love Stories* could be the foot in the door to giving live theater some leverage in the live music domain. Do sketches, do short plays, do an improv show. As far as I'm concerned, the more venues saturated with theater programming, the better.

*Epic Love Stories* runs for exactly one night, this Sunday, September 24 at the Greenwich Odeum. Show up and support Rhode Island theater.

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## [Your Guide to Local Holiday Theater](#)



Christmas Carol, Artist  
Exchange  
([artistexchange.com](http://artistexchange.com))

Christmas is awesome and we as a society are rightfully obsessed with it. At its core, it is the most American of holidays, a reason to spend obscene amounts of money on material things. A reason to stuff yourself with pie until you barf. A reason to get in screaming arguments with your relatives and slip bourbon into your eggnog like grandpa used to. Traditions. Family.

If you're into Christmas, if you're about candy canes and Rankin Bass Claymation, if you can recite - without hesitation - the lyrics to "Baby, It's Cold Outside," there's plenty of theater in Rhode Island this holiday season to scratch the yule-tide itch.

It goes without saying that A Christmas Carol at Trinity Rep (Nov 5 - Dec 31) remains the gold standard. Regardless of whatever particular interpretation prevails year by year; it's an institution. Christmas Story comes on annually on TBS and if I don't get to see the scene where Ralphie beats the shit out of Scut Farkas in the snow, well, it just doesn't feel like Christmas. I imagine it's the same for the families and friends who see A Christmas Carol at Trinity every year. Just wouldn't feel like Christmas without it. To their credit, Trinity has added a Sensory Friendly Performance this year suited to meet the needs of patrons with cognitive and developmental disabilities. It invites the audience to make as much noise as they want and leave and enter as they please. Pretty cool.

There are quite a few productions of Christmas Carol being staged in Rhode Island this holiday. There's Stadium Theatre's Carol in Woonsocket (December 2 - 11). Artists' Exchange is staging a production with performances at both Theater 82 (Dec 8 - 11) and at the historic Park Theater (Dec 15 - 17). And over in Westerly, the Granite Theater gives Dickens the ol' razzle dazzle with a musical adaptation of A Christmas Carol (Nov 25 - Dec 23).

Christmas would be a lot less Christmas-y without Christmas music. This year Ocean State Theatre Company is cooking up a production of White Christmas based on the 1954 film of the same name (Nov 30 - Dec 24). If you were alive in 1954 and like musicals, this is like crack for you, basically. OSTC has a reputation for high-quality musical productions with talented performers and this show is sure to be no exception. The story follows two WWII vets turned vaudevillians who pursue the affection of female singers at a Christmas show in Vermont. Guess what song they sing... guess what they sing in *White Christmas*.

Contemporary Theater in South Kingston has a double whammy of holiday goodness in store this season. First, An Evening with Donner and Blitzen by Andy Hoover runs December 2 - 23. And on December 22, CTC also is hosting a Christmas Cocktail Cabaret at the Towers in Narragansett with carols, music and seasonal scenes. If there's one thing Christmas and theater have in common, they're both better when you've had a few.

Back in Providence, the oft-neglected Barker Playhouse mounts The Christmas Spirit (Dec 2 - 11). It's a festive farce about a woman who bargains with Death to live one last day before she goes. A day which happens to Christmas. To round out the holidays, Empire Revue is hosting a New Year's Eve show - Revue Year's Eve at AS220's Main Stage. The evening includes Empire Revue's monthly variety show featuring stand up, burlesque, sketch comedy and plenty of live music from the Superchief Trio. The Party Animal-themed event goes straight into the new year with the bar at AS220 conveniently open all night. New Year's Eve is still technically Christmas season, by the way. Keep those trees up, you

heathens. Baby Jesus is watching. And don't forget - if you loved Academy's Ant'ny Claus last year, the sequel comes out this year, when beloved Ant'ny has a run-in with the most dangerous man in Johnston. If you're more into classic holiday fare, Little Theatre of Fall River is putting on Gift of the Magi, a hair-raising tale which might give you some holiday shopping ideas.

Need a twist on a classic? Carol's Christmas allows audiences to experience the friendship between Carol and Charles Dickens. Check it out at The Artic Playhouse. And Attleboro Community Theater is putting on The Best Xmas Pageant Ever. We heard it's the best Xmas pageant ever, so check it out! Holiday programming is always fun. It's inclusive. You can bring the younger ones and older ones and they'll all be stoked. They might find some common ground and might start a discussion on the finer points of the production they saw. A multi-generational conversation about art. That's important. But if you learned anything from Scrooge and those ghosts, I hope you consider supporting this community and donating to the smaller theaters in the state. Who knows? With your gift, maybe next year even more theaters will be able to stage even more productions of A Christmas Carol.

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## [A Newcomers Guide to Local Theater](#)

You're new here. Haven't had a chance to settle in and get your cultural bearings on the Ocean State. What even happens in Rhode Island? Is there life outside of Providence? It goes without saying that the food and drink scene is booming, and of course there's a plethora of live music to sift through, but those are such obvious choices for a night out. You have good taste, damn it. You're a classy human being. What could the smallest state in the Union possibly have to offer such a sophisticated palate? World class live theater, that's what.

I've been harping on this all year, but it's a seriously exciting time for theater in Providence, if not Rhode Island as a whole. Several young theater companies have come into their own and many more are popping up on the periphery. If you're into the performing arts, this just might be the best time in a generation to get down with the Rhode Island theater scene. So where do you start?

### **Cooler and Louder**

Downtown Providence is the most exciting place for theater in the state, both for audience and artist alike. Don't get fooled into thinking Trinity Rep is your only option for a show in the capital city. There are two resident theater companies downtown and an ever-rotating roster of companies who perform in collaboration with AS220. The restaurants, the bars and boutiques have made the once run-down downtown more contemporary and urban than ever. With that comes abundant night life and with night life comes hipsters. And with hipsters comes high caliber art. For whatever reason, downtown Providence is dominated by young theater companies doing what is, for my money, the coolest, most daring work in the state.

For starters, there's no one who's doing work quite like Kira Hawkrige and her team at **Out Loud**. Heavy theatrical atmosphere, symbiotic acting ensembles, creative practical effects — these things are standard. But what's truly impressive about Out Loud is that they've managed to develop a distinct voice in such a short time. When you see an Out Loud show, it has a style, it has a flavor all its own. Entering their sixth season, they continue to produce highly stylized shows that remind audiences of the potential of the medium. If you're looking for some arthouse theater, Out Loud on Matthewson Street is your first stop.

Literally around the corner from Matthewson, there's **Burbage Theatre Company** on Westminster. Thanks to a most excellent partnership with Aurora Providence, Burbage has gained a foothold downtown. Another young company, Burbage now has the space and the resources to do some real spectacle shows (*Titus Andronicus*, anyone?). They produce irreverent, provocative work with heavy duty actors at the center. As the resident theater company at one of Providence's busiest performance venues, you're getting a different experience at a Burbage show. You can grab a cocktail, see Burbage do their thing, and then stick around and witness the eclectic grab-bag of live music Aurora has to offer on any given night.

If you walk one block dead ahead from Aurora, you reach Empire Street and Providence's favorite multi-use space, AS220. They host a number of theater companies, but the one to watch out for has to be **Strange Attractor**. Strange Attractor defies category. A little off-kilter, a little tongue-in-cheek, completely original, these guys are a conceptual extravaganza of a theater company. Their previous work includes throwing a birthday party for the whole audience, futuristic spaceship Shakespeare and a love story staged in a post-apocalyptic suitcase fortress. There's something Wes Anderson-y about their aesthetic (check out their videos online, you'll see what I mean) and that's exactly what Providence needs and deserves. The emphasis placed firmly on audience experience, the fourth wall is regularly demolished.

### **Hearty Har-Hars**

**The Providence Improv Guild**, or PIG, has really taken off this year. Their residence at the South Side Cultural Center has afforded them not only performance space, but the opportunity to hold regular improv classes. The whole point of PIG (and let's take a moment to acknowledge that acronym) is to proliferate improv comedy in Rhode Island. Their mission statement indicates that the reason they want you to see a PIG show is so you can take classes and do it yourself. Think about that. You could be in the audience one night, and two months later, you could be up there yourself. If you've ever had the improv itch, PIG's got you covered.

Back at AS220, be sure to catch **Empire Revue**. This monthly show offers a hilarious, grin-inducing mix of sketch comedy and music.

### **Jazz Hands!**

Okay, so you're into musicals. That's fine. I'm not here to judge, I'm here to help. Take a drive over to Warwick and get your Rogers and Hammerstein on with **Ocean State Theatre Company**. They've basically become the gold standard for the singing and dancing stuff in Rhode Island. The production quality is high, there's a bunch of showtimes for each production and their building is bright blue. Rather than frequenting PPAC, if you've got a hankering for some kicklines and four-part harmonies, hit up OSTC.

Although they aren't necessarily a musical theater company, it's worth mentioning that **The Wilbury Group** puts on the best musicals that you can't take your grandma to. Alternative musical theater, I guess, is what you'd call it? They have a history of staging awesome straight plays, but where Wilbury differentiates themselves from the herd is their musicals. *Passing Strange*; *Next to Normal*; *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson* — definitely a little more edgy in terms of content than say, *Damn Yankees*. Which is fine. Again, you can like musicals. You're allowed to. Um... Anyway...

### **Fresh, Never Frozen**

If you wanna roll the dice and check out some new plays, Rhode Island has no shortage of playwrights creating original work. The aforementioned **Wilbury Group** has developed an impressive new works program including staged readings, workshops and full-fledged productions by resident playwright Ben Jolivet. Over at **Epic Theatre Company**, the ubiquitous Kevin Broccoli generates and stages an obscene amount of content, some of which pertains to Greek mythology and strippers. And if you're willing to venture to West Warwick, Lenny Schwartz and **The Arctic Playhouse** also perform a ton of new work.

Seeing plays in Rhode Island has been unexpectedly rewarding. The variety of work continues to surprise me, and I keep finding talented people who inspire me. If you're strictly looking to be a spectator in the scene, awesome. Theater needs a reliable audience. But if you're an ex-theater kid, a fledgling playwright or a vagabond dramaturg, I urge you to be brave and participate. Go to auditions, workshop your play, take an improv class. You'll understand why I said this place has world class live theater. Once you get over the potholes, the accents and the corruption, Rhode Island's not such a bad place.

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## **[Around the Edges: FringePVD 2016](#)**

How brave are you? When was the last time you did something that wasn't a sure thing? If you've been feeling a little humdrum about your entertainment options lately, there is a weird and crazy beacon of theater returning to Providence this summer to shake things up.

The Providence Fringe Festival is probably one of the most exciting things that happens in the city all year. I worked the doors at last year's Fringe and witnessed an infestation of artists from all over the country descend on Providence to show us what they've got. Musicians, puppeteers, actors, dancers, magicians and everything in between. It's a chance for American theater at large to meet Providence and for us to boast some of our own homegrown talent in return.

FringePVD, The Providence Fringe Festival, or just Fringe, started in 2014 and the event has roughly doubled in size since its inception. This year, there are 200 performances all told. Fifty-plus groups of performers are participating, composed of about 150 artists. Eleven venues. About half of the acts are from elsewhere in the country. Those are pretty impressive stats.

The event has been designed in such a way that you can optimize your experience not just in terms of

seeing a lot of shows, but in experiencing Providence itself. Most of the venues are in a cluster downtown and are within walking distance of one another. There are 15 minutes in between each show so you can scoot around the city without the crippling anxiety of missing the first scene. Thanks to the totally chill theatrical advocates at places like Aurora, AS220, The Dean Hotel, RISD and the Matthewson Street Black Box, there's a network of venues to hop around, stop for a drink, maybe a meal and see three or four shows in one night for like, no money.

Did I mention a good portion of the Fringe is free? Or like, \$10? That helps. In fact, all of the proceeds from Fringe go directly back to the artists. Neither the venues nor FringePVD collect from the performances.

So what do you see? How do you start?

Festival Director Kate Kataja advises that you "see the stuff that first jumps out at you and then go see things that make you go, 'I don't get what that is.' Go see THAT."

There is some weird shit that happens at Fringe. There is some awesome stuff, but there is some totally uncensored, very questionable shit as well. And why not? "There's a gap between traditional theater space and people who are performing in living rooms," Kate told me. "And both those things are great."

Even the most ill-conceived pieces of theater are, in a way, great. Where else could you see some of this stuff but Fringe? The balance between the good and the bad is sort of the point.

At a glance, the lineup this year has some definite stand-outs and some where there's just no telling.

For me, I'm looking at *Darlings*, the story of Peter Pan as told by the parents of the Darling children. Brien Lang has written a musical called *The My Way Murders* based on killings over Frank Sinatra karaoke in the Philippines (look this up, it's crazy). Also, Julia Bartoletti's *Bard the Band* is an all Shakespearean musical experience that sounds as nerdy as it is entertaining. And did I mention there's an Oregon Trail play? There's an Oregon Trail play. *Ruts! The Oregon Trail Experience* is probably at the top of my wish list this year.

I have the feeling that something's about to happen in the Providence theater scene and Fringe could not have come along at a better time. Theater is, ultimately, broad and multifaceted with no one right way to do it. There's no one music. There's no one sculpture or one literature. There are genres, subsets and niches that comprise theater just as in all art. FringePVD celebrates that like no other event in the city. Theater in Providence is becoming bold, uninhibited. People are trying things and the prevailing attitude in the scene seems to be, "Why the not?" Fringe is evidence of that not only in the gnarly content showcased, but in the sheer fact that Josh Short and the Wilbury Group wanted Providence to have a fringe festival and they fucking made it happen.

This could become a landmark event for Providence if we treat it like one. I honestly think that's all it will take. We have great spaces for theater staffed by hard-working and talented people (looking at you, Aurora) and an inexhaustible crop of homegrown theater pieces to perform. From the delightfully quirky to the flat out bizarre, FringePVD offers something unlike any other event in the city. If you're brave enough.

*FringePVD takes places at various venues throughout the city July 26 through 30. Go to [fringepvd.org](http://fringepvd.org) for more info.*

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## [Maudern Love: 2nd Story's Harold and Maude](#)

Manic Pixie Dream Girl. In popular culture, the young female character who cures the despondent male protagonist of his sadness through her sheer quirkiness. Zooey Deschanel in *500 Days of Summer*, Natalie Portman in *Garden State*, the list goes on. Manic Pixies are kind of a problematic trope that feeds into the Nice Guy/Friendzone ethos of modern masculinity. They rarely grow as characters, and as a result, neither do their protagonist counterparts. *Harold and Maude*, however, is an exception.

2<sup>nd</sup> Story's production of *Harold and Maude* is the most fun you can have with existentialism this summer. Kevin Broccoli has put together a charming, dare I say fun, production of this cult classic. We're back to the round Upstairs at 2<sup>nd</sup> Story, and the staging is effective. Five blocks that double as prop storage comprise the set with two doorways at either end. It's spare, but the '60s floral patterns that adorn the floor make the space feel full. There's some nice visual gags (actually, like, several in the first 15 minutes) and some undeniable theatrical magic.

*Harold and Maude*, for those of you without Netflix, is about a depressed young man stuck in a routine of attending funerals and staging his own elaborate suicides. He meets a quirky girl who's into painting and the occasional grand theft. She's free, she's vibrant, she's almost 80 years old. Harold's mother tries desperately to set him up with a girl, but alas, Maude steals Harold's heart and before it's over, Harold learns there's more to living than just death. It's a Manic Pixie Dream Girl story.

As Maude, Isabel O'Donnell delivers a kick of energy to every scene. She was eccentric and bubbly, and she completely lived up to the role. Likewise, Evan Kinnane caught the tone of his character well, and had that introspective, tortured artist vibe you want with Harold. Val Westgate had incredible cameos as Harold's various dates, consistently hilarious three entrances in a row. Paula Faber as Mrs. Chasen, of course, conveys nicely that she doesn't give a shit about her son Harold's happiness.

Tech was up to spec. In particular, a great ambient floating light cue added an extra punch to a scene in which Maude explains the majesty of the stars. There was a collective 'Ooh' from the audience. Ditto to a more practical cue that revealed hidden Christmas lights woven into the lightboard during Harold's last date with Maude.

The costumes in the show were out of control and that's a shout out to Ron Cesario for doing the shit out of his job. If you like hats and shoes and pins and eclectic Brady Bunch era clothing, *Harold and Maude* is worth seeing for the costume design alone.

This play isn't going to change your life, but it's nonetheless a worthwhile theatrical experience. One thing about staging in the round is that you, as the audience, can clearly see the people sitting across from you. And there were abundant smiling faces at *Harold and Maude* ... except for one kid with his headphones in for the whole show. Which is a shame because this show was basically about him and all the angry loner teenage boys of the world. And looking around the audience, there was no shortage of

sultry senior Manic Pixie Dream Girls to pick from.

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## [Awesome F\\*cking Play: Wilbury Gives Rhode Island Theater the Bird](#)



Vince Petronio in “Stupid Fucking Bird” at The Wilbury Theatre Group; photo by Maggie Hall.

Ah, the adaptation. Sarah Ruhl’s practically made a career out of them and lately, everyone from Suzan Lori Parks to Ben Jolivet is getting in on the action. Aaron Posner’s *Stupid Fucking Bird*, the latest from The Wilbury Theatre Group, is touted as a ‘sort of’ adaptation of Chekov’s *The Seagull*. It dances between the world of the play and the realm of reality, rife with fourth wall breaks, asides and ukulele ballads. This play could have been a pretentious evening of self-congratulating wink-wink meta-theater, but in the hands of Mark Peckham and the Wilbury Group, *Stupid Fucking Bird* is a hilarious and unpredictable ride.

So, full disclosure, I’ve never seen or read *The Seagull*. Thus, Wikipedia is where my knowledge of the source material begins and ends. (Whatever, fight me.) *Stupid Fucking Bird*, as in *The Seagull*, follows the intrepid Con (Josh Short) as he attempts to succeed as a director and win the approval of his mother, Emma (Melissa Penick) and the love of his muse, Nina (Shannon Hartman). When the famous writer Trigorin (Brien Lang) comes to see Con’s play, Nina becomes enamored with his fame and prestige, leaving Con to stew in miserable, broke-ass obscurity. Sounds like a pretty heavy show, right?

Nah, bro.

*Stupid Fucking Bird* is the most fun you can have with late 19th century Russian theater. Mark Peckham has staged a transparent, anti-theater production with the dressing room fully visible from the audience and actors pulling double duty as stage crew. Even the booth is on stage, giving the audience the privilege of seeing live tech at work. The staging supports the atmosphere of self-aware meta-theater where characters are fully conscious of the play they are in. It's rendered in simplicity and blurs the line between where the play begins and ends.

The meta-theatricality of *SFB* is definitely the appeal. Masha (Rachel Dulude) promptly tells the audience to shut up after one of her songs about the futility of existence. There's lots of inbuilt theater jokes, some Chekov jokes, and several opportunities to deprecate Wilbury and their space at Trinity Church. At one point, the house lights come up and Con directly asks the audience what he should do to get Nina back. After some hesitation, the consensus seemed to be that he should write her a song. I was going to say pizza.

In terms of drama, it's a play of triangles. Con loves Nina who loves Trigorin. Mash loves Con but settles for Dev (Andrew Iacovelli). Emma loves Trigorin but has trouble showing affection for her own son. It makes for a lot of swearing, a couple bullet wounds, and a healthy dose of on-stage sex. *SFB* is a remix, a commentary, but the center holds and the drama is real.

In a rare appearance, Wilbury's artistic director, Josh Short, leads the pack as Con. Short develops from a neurotic, well-meaning director to a believably unstable, suicidal wreck over the course of the play. Rachel Dulude simply rocks as the despondent, ukulele wielding Mash, and for my money has some of the best comedy in the show. Melissa Penick delights as the boozy Emma and Andrew Iacovelli approaches Dev with subtle humanity, which turns what could be a hapless, moronic character into a lovable hapless, moronic character. As Trigorin, Brien Lang indulges in elitist intellectual douchery (in a good way). Shannon Hartman flips a bird to the typical ingénue and in a particularly memorable Act Three, turns on a dime and produces some real madness as Nina. And I can't forget Vince Petronio, who from his first entrance has the audience in the palm of his hand as Dr. Sorn.

*Stupid Fucking Bird* is Wilbury at its best. No other company in the state is doing shows like this, and few could approach this play with such understanding and tact. It's irreverent, it's dark, it's funny, it's deep, it's punk as fuck. You don't wanna miss this one.

*Stupid Fucking Bird* runs thru February 6; The Wilbury Theatre Group, 393 Broad St, Providence.

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## **Ensemble, Assemble! New Theater Dominates Downtown Providence**



I had the opportunity to sit down with two of Rhode Island's youngest and most prolific artistic directors: Kira Hawkrigde of Out Loud and Jeff Church of Burbage Theatre Company. I wanted to find out what exactly was happening in downtown Providence — how these would-be rivals manage to cohabit the same block and compete for audiences in one of the most hipster-centric cities on Earth. What sort of insidious "Game of Thrones"-style plots did these masterminds have up their sleeves?

"It's all about ensemble. Finding a really good group of people who are willing to work with one another and not stick to one rigid thing," said Church. Hawkrigde dittoed, "The ensemble is something we agree on, but what drives us is also very different, which is exciting."

Collaboration is the name of the game. Despite aesthetic differences, the mission of these two companies is remarkably similar. Big ambition, small budget. "Those types of limitations allow you to explore ... embracing where we are and not looking at it as a limitation, but an opportunity," a disarmingly articulate Kira Hawkrigde said. Jeff added, "Having limited resources, if you want to call them limited, keeps us to very theatrical means."

Those limitations have facilitated some truly daring work. Burbage is mounting productions of Vonnegut and Shakespeare at their home base, Aurora Providence on Westminster. Just down the street on Matthewson, Out Loud embarks on a season based entirely in the public domain (*Antigone*, *Dracula*, *Coriolanus*) — and get this — admission is free.

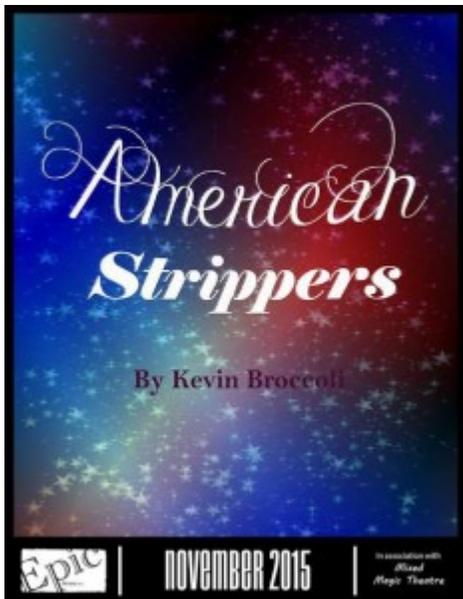
But make no mistake, these kids have paid their dues. Out Loud is going into its fourth season, and Burbage is about to enter its sixth year of existence. They've spent that time cultivating a core group, an ensemble, but also fostered an atmosphere of collaboration where artists from theaters across the state are invited to participate.

Both companies are gaining serious momentum. With each passing season they improve, attract new talent, and drive the medium forward. But is there a place for theater in the ultra-cool oasis that is Providence? In a city that *The New York Times* recently called "the Portland, Oregon, of the Northeast" (\*vomit\*) where food, visual art and music dominate, can theater compete?

Alone, either company could succumb to its own devices and fade into oblivion. Together, however, they can prop one another up and support and advocate for their art in what is, in my opinion, an uphill battle for recognition and acceptance. Considering the strides these young thespians have made in such a short time, my gut tells me they have a shot.

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## [Just Ass for All: Epic's American Strippers](#)



I never thought I'd get to see Davey Crockett eat out the goddess Artemis, but thanks to the magic of theater, the image is indelibly seared into my brain. I don't know what else I expected going to a play called *American Strippers*. Especially a play called *American Strippers* by Kevin Broccoli.

Epic Theatre's latest play follows the bachelorette party of the goddess Aphrodite at a strip club in Texas. The club, Americana, is staffed by American folk heroes like Johnny Appleseed and Pecos Bill. Hera, queen of the gods, is not about these shenanigans and goes to Texas to put a stop to it. There's an orgy, some stripping, a hired murder and a slow dance — not to mention, like, a gratuitous, practically sarcastic amount of stripping.

The routines in *American Strippers* are ridiculous, and I say that with affection. The dancers get all up in the audience's business, swing on poles and give out lap dances. At one point, Davey Crockett pulled a girl from the audience on stage and gave her a private dance. There's a history lesson for ya'.

The play itself, a new work, was a pretty even mix of scenes and monologues (and stripping). The story has sort of an erotic fan fiction vibe, what with all the Greek goddesses and all the American folk heroes together in one location, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. There are real pearls in this play. Some very memorable lines, thought-provoking speeches and great big comedy. Broccoli chooses to play out some of the most intimate, sexual moments on stage in real time. I know we're not as shocked by sexual content as we used to be, but it's so different in real life. And if nothing else, I appreciated the choice to utilize the reality of theater to highlight the romantic themes of the play.

Epic assembled a strong ensemble for this show. As Aphrodite, Kerry Giorgi carries the emotional weight and has some real moments of tenderness as she confronts her feelings. Melanie Stone, as the hot and bothered Artemis, delivers moments of impeccable comedy. Ditto on the comedy for Tammy Brown as Hera. Jay Walker and Michael Puppi were particularly memorable for their monologues as

John Henry and Johnny Appleseed, respectively.

If there's a takeaway from *American Strippers*, it seems to be that in America, you get to be as fucked-up as you want to be and you get to choose who you love. You can be a pervert, you can be a stripper, you can watch, you can join in. It's a totally debauched thunderfuck of a show, but it has a purpose, and it has heart.

Kevin Broccoli wrote and directed this play and to put anything you create out there, to do it yourself, is punk as hell. *American Strippers* isn't for everybody. It isn't a mainstream, squeaky-shiny play. And that's precisely the appeal.

*American Strippers* will be performed through November 21 at Mixed Magic Theatre, 560 Mineral Spring Ave, Pawtucket. For tickets, go to [brownpapertickets.com/event/1761401](http://brownpapertickets.com/event/1761401)

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## [Book of Jolivet: Wilbury Group's World Premiere of Cain + Abel](#)



Photo by Maggie Hall

God is kind of a dick. Why does he allow so much suffering? Why all the smiting? What is his obsession with blood sacrifice? For their latest production, The Wilbury Group staged the world premiere of Ben Jolivet's *Cain + Abel*, a thoughtful take on the impotence of God in a world of temptation and hurt.

This is a new play. I think that scares people, somehow. If they're going to spend the money to go to the theater, the play had better be worth it. So let me be clear. *Cain + Abel* is a good play. Well worth your while. Easily up to par with the work Wilbury produces and in keeping with their progressive aesthetic. *Cain + Abel* goes like this: Cain, an intellectual, and his brother, Abel, a meathead, have philosophical differences about the limits of religion, namely sacrifice, in their lives. Abel is married to Mariah, but finds himself tempted by the slithery Lilith. Cain develops a relationship with a mysterious Wanderer and has an existential awakening. While sex and temptation drive Abel deeper into guilt, he feels the need to repent, to surrender something to God. The resulting climax is a satisfying spin on the old story.

Playwright Ben Jolivet has crafted a dramatically tight, existential think piece in the key of Genesis. This could have been a preachy play where characters talk at length about purpose and identity in a Judeo-Christian vs. Atheist tone, but instead Jolivet demonstrates his themes using real drama — his characters want things and they act. Jolivet has a knack for comedy and delivers some gems of poetry and wisdom throughout the play.

The production itself is totally engaging. Visually and dramatically interesting from start to finish. The set is a rock garden-slash-sandbox filled with actual sand. (My sympathies to the actors and stage crew who got sand all up in their crevices.) Director Susie Schutt made great use of the sandy stage, having characters crawl and perch and roll in the dirt. Floating dust added an extra dimension of theatricality. These ethereal clouds added real weight to moments of stillness in the play. Not sure if it was entirely intentional, but definitely cool.

The cast was solid. As Cain and Abel, Jeff Hodge and Tobias Wilson, respectively, share some tender, brotherly moments and navigated seamlessly through comedy into tense conflict. Roger Lemelin's resonant voice and epic beard make him ideal as the Wanderer. And Melissa Penick is indulgently evil as Lilith, not to mention hilarious.

I liked this play. Drug use, abundant sex, profanity — it passed all the marks. I commend the Wilbury Group for their initiatives in developing new works. If the scene is going to survive, Rhode Island needs writers for the stage. And good ones. Ben Jolivet nailed it with *Cain + Abel* and I look forward to his future collaborations with Wilbury.