

Opinion: Time for Mockingbird to Fly Away



If you follow theater news, you've probably been made aware of several cancelled productions of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, including one in Massachusetts, due to super-producer Scott Rudin claiming that these productions were in violation of an agreement that Rudin made with the Harper Lee estate in regard to Rudin's Broadway version, which is written by Aaron Sorkin.

It's a little thorny, and no matter how many times I read Rudin's argument, the word "bullshit" keeps popping up in my head, but I'll do my best to explain it while also acknowledging that I find this whole thing pretty dubious.

There's a version of *Mockingbird* that's widely done, written by Christopher Sergel, and that is the version all these smaller theaters were producing. Rudin is essentially saying that, "Yes, you may have made an agreement with Dramatic Publishing Company to produce that version, but you have to produce it under guidelines that we created with the Harper Lee estate, even though you probably weren't made aware of these guidelines by DPC because who the hell reads the fine print on stuff like this?" Rudin has made the brilliant PR decision to shut down all these amateur productions, presumably because he feels like these smaller companies and their work pose a threat to his big, giant, Broadway show that you can't even get a ticket to, and his recent solution to allow these groups to put on his version of the show has been reported by some media outlets as, you know, cool and generous, when really, it's mostly hollow and self-serving, because most of these groups have torn down their sets and the ones that haven't would still have to re-rehearse what is, essentially, a brand new show.

One has to wonder what the logic was in doing all this, and because I can't get inside the mind of Scott Rudin, that's not really what this piece is going to be about. Instead, I'd like to ask the following question, which has already been asked and discussed by much smarter people than me, but nevertheless:

Why did Broadway need a new adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and why did Aaron Sorkin have to be the one to write it when he made it pretty clear that his only way into a story like that would be to pivot it away from being the young female protagonist and focus instead of her father, Atticus, even more so than the original work did?

And not to kick these theaters when they're down, but:

Why are so many theaters doing *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the first place?

It's one of my favorite books and a damn good movie, but the Sergel version is clumsy at best, and usually when a theater does it, it's not so much in an effort to have a conversation about race, but because it's a money grab that will invariably sell out, because people want to watch their niece play Mayella.

Rudin is, unquestionably, a bully, and I hope the theaters who got their productions shut down by him tell him to take his offer and shove it, but I also hope they use this as an opportunity to dig deeper when it comes to choosing shows for their season and explore more contemporary work that looks at some of the same issues, or even — gasp — a new play. This entire mini-scandal seems so lurid, mostly because Lee was reported to be very unwell toward the end of her life, with people in her estate making questionable decisions on her behalf, including the publication of a *Mockingbird* sequel that is bad even as far as sequels go.

I should mention that I have a pretty extreme view when it comes to things like copyright and feel that once the creator of a work dies, everything they've done should go into the public domain immediately, but that's made me the target of many a comments section. This isn't one of those situations that's going to have a happy ending, and Rudin's intent seems to be, at least partly, that the Sorkin version permanently replace the Sergel version from here on in. It's reasonable to ask why DPS isn't stepping up to defend these smaller companies instead of allowing Rudin to push them around.

Either way, I think it is time we retire *Mockingbird* from the theater for a while. As a novel, it has few equals, but as a play, it never really matched the magnitude of its source material.

I guess in some cases, there really are no substitutions.

Arctic's Life in the Theater — it's About Time



David Mamet used to be one of the most heavily produced playwrights

in the country with smash hits such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna* regularly appearing at any theater that wanted to be seen as “edgy.” Mamet had the golden ticket — his work was considered high art while also appealing to the masses. Nowadays, his brand of theatrical testosterone isn’t all that *de rigueur*, but even in his heyday, you’d be hard-pressed to find a production of *A Life in the Theater*, his two-hander tribute/love letter to the theater and the people who do it. The last high-profile production was a 2010 Broadway revival with Patrick Stewart and T.R. Knight that didn’t exactly set the Great White Way on fire.

Ironically, *A Life in the Theater* should probably be considered one of Mamet’s most approachable plays, if his least Mamet-y. It is tender, touching and eloquent, and filled with episodic qualities you wouldn’t necessarily ascribe to plays like *The Cryptogram* or *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. And, because the Rhode Island theater community has recently transformed itself into a place where any project seems possible, you can now catch an energetic and efficient production of the play at the Arctic Playhouse in Warwick, directed by Tony Annicone.

Annicone certainly wasn’t given much help from Mamet with this one. The play is episodic, yes, but the episodes travel from genre to genre, the only connection being the two actors who show us lives behind-the-scenes and onstage in plays that range from wartime sentimentality to highly stylized melodrama. Because the scenes come fast and furious, transitions and pacing are of the utmost importance, and Annicone makes sure his two actors land their laughs and convey their passion for the work while not bogging down the show with heavy pauses or overdone theatricality — impressive, since that would be the show’s biggest trap.

It’s easy to imagine two actors having fun embodying two, well, actors as they play everything from doctors to men stranded at sea. W. Richard Johnson is wonderful as the more experienced actor who tries to impart wisdom to his younger colleague even as his memory begins to fail him and his skills start to rust. In one of the scenes, Johnson asks if his fellow actor is going out after the show, and his desperation and depression are handled with care and compassion. Mamet obviously feels for the older actor, but he doesn’t want us to feel bad for him — just to see ourselves in a man who still has his passion, but is slowly losing everything else.

The younger actor is portrayed by Alvaro Beltran with skilled comic timing and smart characterizations. While Johnson has the bulk of the lines, Beltran’s reactions to his partner’s depreciation are often riotous while still being nuanced. In one scene, Beltran is trying to keep his composure while Johnson yells from offstage, and despite not being able to see one another, the connection between the two actors in that moment secured some of the biggest laughs of the evening.

One of the trickiest things about the play is how it requires the actors to create onstage mishaps and then react to them in the moment. From a wig falling off a dummy that they’re operating on to contending with aggressive leaf-action from the devilish and delightful stage manager, Johnson and Beltran are clearly very comfortable with the play’s farcical elements, and Annicone knows exactly how to get the most out of those moments without settling for easy laughs.

Theater about theater is often mocked for being self-indulgent, but *A Life in the Theater* illustrates the cruelty and comedy of time in ways that could apply to any two people working in a field that seems to favor the young. At a brisk 90 minutes (with an intermission) it’s the perfect play for some of these colder February days when giving yourself over to an experienced director and two actors at the top of their game seems like the ideal reason to spend a life in the audience.

The Arctic Playhouse presents David Mamet's *A Life in the Theater* through February 17. 117 Washington St, West Warwick. For tickets, call 401-573-3443 or visit thearcticplayhouse.com/shows-events

A Conversation about Black Odyssey with Joe Wilson Jr.



It's commonplace in theater for a show to get a lot of press leading up to its opening, then reviews, then disappear off our critical radar even though most professional productions run for weeks after that and, in fact, get even better as the actors and artists working on them settle into the work.

In an effort to dig deeper into some of the more innovative theatrical work happening in Rhode Island right now, I had a conversation with Trinity Acting Company Member Joe Wilson Jr. about co-directing and acting in the incredible *Black Odyssey* by Marcus Gardley that finished its run this weekend. It's a production with a massive scope that still offers an intimate look at the American experience in ways we've never quite seen onstage before, and Wilson and his co-director Jude Sandy, along with their actors and designers, did an incredible job putting it together.

Here's our conversation.

Kevin Broccoli: I was lucky enough to see the play in previews, but it was already clear that a really strong ensemble had formed, which is especially impressive knowing that some of you have probably never worked together until this production. Can you talk a little bit about what sort of work you did in rehearsal to create that unity that's so visible onstage?

Joe Wilson Jr.: Quite frankly it started with the play. It started with this play that assembled and required African-American actors to come together and tell this epic story. The opportunity for actors of color to be able to work on this kind of material with each other is a rare thing. We, the American theater, have been struggling to expand our canon and continue to expand our canon, and we've done it by embracing new playwrights and other voices, but we have a lot of work to do when it comes to having a full representation of stories. But yes, the play was the thing. And the event was having nine actors of color come into a space and tell a story that was by and for them. We don't have that opportunity very often, so that in and of itself became a wonderful galvanizing tool for our project. And I think what made our process very special and different was that Jude Sandy and I co-directed this

production. I don't know if that's ever been done at Trinity Rep while both directors were also in the show. I think that forced Jude and me to be open and transparent with every member of the company. To be a voice and a sounding board. We weren't looking to have typical actor/director relationships. When you get us all in a room we all have license and agency and ideas, so we created a process of openness and transparency out of necessity. So we needed very early on to create a sense in the room that everyone had to have ownership of their work, because of the nature of our process. Remarkably, from day one, our room was open and empathetic and compassionate and honest and celebratory. We laughed a lot. We were able to look around the room and see that just us being in the room together was indeed special, and we had in our hands a remarkable piece of writing.

KB: The play is this gorgeous, sprawling epic that's sort of like a kaleidoscope of history, folklore and mythology. It's the sort of ambitious work some theaters are afraid to tackle, so I was thrilled to see it onstage at Trinity. What was your first experience with the piece? Did you find it and bring it to others at Trinity or was it given to you?

JW: This play was chosen a year ago and I wasn't a part of that process. I knew I would be in the show, and due to unforeseen circumstances, the original director was no longer able to be part of the production. So with a month to go, it became a matter of all hands on deck. My first impulse was to say to Curt [Columbus, Trinity's artistic director], "Maybe let's try having Jude and I co-direct it," and Curt thought it would be an incredible idea. So Jude and I had to switch our hats from actors to directors. First we had to cast the play and we had to make sure our design team was still onboard. Jude and I then had to go into crash course mode of re-reading and re-reading the play over and over again. We literally had a month to figure this all out. Casting was a challenge. It required a lot of phone calls, it required a lot of people being recommended to us. We're discovering that as an institution we can't just do this work in a vacuum. It requires years of relationship building the same way we build relationships with our audiences. If you don't have the internal support and the external support, there's no way we could have pulled this off. If we didn't have existing relationships that we built over the course of years to have the people in those relationships trust us enough and believe in us enough, there's just no way. So I credit my institution and the work we've done with community engagement.

KB: Can you talk about the music in the production? It's an incredibly important element of the storytelling and I thought it was just remarkable.

JW: Our music director, Michael Evora, actually arranged all the music for acapella voices for us; he's incredible. We love him. Music became the second most important thing in the play after the text. Music is so important to African-American experience in this country. Gardley goes through an historical retrospective in this piece. We knew from scene one that the playwright found the music in this play very important because in the beginning he takes us upon this episodic journey of music through the African-American culture. How are we going to handle the music? How are we going to incorporate instrumentation? How we were going to create the soundscape was critical. What made it a little more intuitive to us was that because we had to treat the sound in such a unique way, it allowed for each of the actors to bring their own voice to the music. We were able to craft the music around our artists.

KB: One of the things that struck me about the show was how fresh it feels considering its core is a story that's as old as time — a hero trying to get home. Marcus Gardley is both a poet and a playwright, and the play is full of this lush language, but it's also full of theatrical events and moments. There's sometimes a misconception that professional theaters get tons of extra time to put shows together, when really it's the opposite. How did you decide how much time to spend on the different facets of the

script — like the language and the events, for example?

JW: Well, it's about how do you maximize the idea of creating imagery and being as evocative as possible without literally trying to be in different places? How do we allow the audience to use their imagination in as many ways as possible? How can we be evocative with bodies and space? We're an actor-driven institution. Working with the set designer, in terms of trying to make the space as transformable as possible as quickly as possible. We knew that walls and doors and practical structure would not be our friends. Those chains that form the back wall of the theater is a mile worth of chains from end to end. We wanted something we could move easily through. This show I think is about breaking chains, it's about breaking the cycles of oppression. And the idea of seeing through the chains, the idea of seeing past where we are, we did not want any kind of walls in this production — we have a relationship with the audience as we have a relationship with our ancestors. That idea of looking into the past as looking into the future, so we're trying to work metaphorically on different levels. We needed the space to create evocative images and we wanted to train our audiences to not think in terms of the literal. All too often people come into a theater and they want to sit back and have a passive relationship to the work and Marcus Gardley requires that we lean forward. The message in this play is we have to stop having passive relationships to history. We have to want to understand and try to see each other.

Working in theater is a collaboration. It's also a collaboration of scheduling. A lot of how we divide our time has to do with that. We have a cast composed of our acting company and our Providence-based artist community and members of our company who are from Boston and we have members of our company from our graduate program. Scheduling dictates a lot of how we work on the play. But to not put it all on scheduling, Jude and I committed on day one that there are a lot of times in a four-week rehearsal period where there's an anxiousness to get on our feet as much as possible, and we committed to spend as much time around the table as needed. We read the play and talked about the play and talked about, first and foremost, what are the mechanics of the story? What does this chess board thing mean? Who are these gods? What are their relationships to African deities? And we did not rush to get to our feet. We knew that if our cast understood the play, they would understand how to behave in the world of that play. If you don't spend enough time getting a cast on the same page of what the rules are, you get onstage and you hit a wall because actors are saying, "I don't understand the sense of this. I don't understand where we are and how we got here." We knew we had too much to do in the second week of rehearsal to have actors not clear on all that. The play had to win out. We knew we could tell this story with just bodies and space. Approaching the play to tell it with that kind of clarity was the most important thing.

KB: I'm curious to hear about the process in terms of working with a co-director.

JW: Having two directors became our great strength. I work very much from the inside as an actor — very character-driven, psychologically-driven. Jude said early on, "Joe is going to be on the inside on this play." It worked because I'm playing the emotional center of the play. And Jude is very much more of a visual person, because he's also a dancer. So the nature of how we work individually as artists gives him a great gift. So we could tackle this play from both sides. Jude had a hand in crafting what this show was visually. We were also transparent to the cast about that. We were never afraid to say, "I don't know. What do you think?" That gave our cast and our production team as well a sense of agency and ownership over the work.

KB: How would you tell people to watch the show? I've been telling friends who are seeing the show

that watching it in a traditional way would be a mistake. That you sort of have to take it as it comes, because it's this wonderful collage of music and poetry and theater all at once. Do you think that's inaccurate? It's such a unique piece, it feels like it needs something unique from its audience.

JW: I think it's a very different kind of theatrical experience, but I think it's an experience we've all had before. It's using the Odyssey as a framework, but the lens is through black people in this country over the past 390 years. I think when you deal with these kind of sweeping epic productions, if you don't allow it to wash over you, you don't give yourself a chance to understand and be confused, and I think that's also a metaphor for the African-American experience over the course of our existence in this country. I think African-Americans have had to find a variety of ways to exist in this country and survive, whether that be through drama or music or laughter. I think this play goes from being a study in poetry and then becomes absolutely pedestrian in its scenes in Oakland. It is a reflection of the coping mechanism of the way African-Americans have to survive this experience called America. We live in a culture and a time when we want instant gratification. We want to know now. We want the information now — without allowing ourselves to operate in spaces of not knowing. Of spaces of not understanding. Of spaces of not being comfortable. The form of the play then becomes a metaphor for that. That's why this play is an epic journey. Ulysses finds himself floating in spaces where he doesn't exactly know what's going on.

KB: Now that you've been performing the show for awhile, what's the cost to you as a performer?

JW: I guess what fuels us going forward with this production is the joy that we see from our cast. The gratitude that we see from our audiences. That, as an experience, it gives us the strength to keep going forward. I don't know any play that doesn't take a toll, but I think part of what makes this play repeatable eight times a week is what Marcus Gardley has built into this play. The resilience that comes through the music. The resilience that comes through the humor of the play. The form of the play mimics how we, as a people, have survived. The play rejuvenates us. The play keeps feeding us. There are moments in the play where I feel like I can't go on emotionally, and the playwright gives us a song or a line or a laugh and it propels me forward. The play remains the thing and the experience is rejuvenating. Yes, it's taxing and emotional, but it's thrilling.

RI Theater: 2019 and Beyond



It's difficult to predict what the future of theater will be — or if there will be a future for anything, really — and trying to predict what theater will be like in Rhode Island in five, 10 or 100 years from now is a difficult challenge.

We've always had a very unique theater community here, and that's not a statement of exceptionalism. Rhode Island is ... odd in ways both quirky and frustrating. It might be because of how much we cram into such a small state — beaches, suburbs, rural areas, multiple colleges, furniture celebrities, the word "bubblers," Mineral Spring Avenue — but whatever the reason, our theater scene has expanded in leaps and bounds over the past few years, and like any other boom, it's understandable to worry that we may be heading for an eventual pop.

Looking toward what's to come, it seems like the changes RI needs to make to keep its vital theater scene active are no different than the changes theater everywhere has to make or risk falling victim to the temptations of isolation. People opting to stay in and stream something on the new Apple channel (Are we calling them channels or...?) rather than having a communal theatrical experience, because, ugh, people are exhausting, right? And, like, that's probably not going to change anytime soon.

One way to ensure the survival of local theater is to have a clear point of view. For a while, it seemed as though people were just starting theater companies to play their bucket list roles (author of this article raises his hand sheepishly), but now we're starting to see groups forming like the WomensWork Theatre Collaborative. This group has a clear point of view and an underrepresented audience it's trying to reach. It also gives artists who reflect those audiences and find themselves with limited creative outlets a place to speak and perform.

Many local theatermakers figured out a long time ago that it's no longer enough to have one or two "events" in their season while they fill the rest with unwarranted revivals and liberal echo-chambers designed to attract rich people who want to take in an evening of theater before and after cocktails. These days, every production has to be an event. Some people might complain about that, but isn't that how it always should have been?

Earlier this year, I spoke to Trinity's artistic director, Curt Columbus, about how the theater's season now seems entirely made up of what the movie industry calls "tentpoles," which is really just another name for events.

If you look at Trinity's season over the last few years, they've not only seemed to embrace the idea of bigger and bolder theater, but they've also taken huge steps toward creating a diverse roster of shows with playwrights and directors from all different backgrounds, who are willing to take old stalwarts like *The Glass Menagerie* and *Othello* and turn them on their heads.

So often in theater we find ourselves arguing about whether we should abandon shows that are overdone or dive deeper into them to see why they've hung around for so long. Trinity seems to be adopting the latter approach, and I'm glad they have. While any theater that tries this is bound to misfire every now and again, when they hit — like their production of *The Grapes of Wrath* a few years back — they hit big. It's those risks that we need to see more of in the future. Musicals about Beowulf? Bring 'em on. An underwater production of *The Seagull*? Why not? Those of us who go to the theater no matter what may sometimes balk at what seem like gimmicks, but the only difference between a gimmick and a concept is execution, and besides — gimmicks work. They get people into the theater who might not otherwise go, and if they're moved by what they see, they become theater people.

That's the hope anyway, but if the future is anything like the present, hope may be all we have.

I remember seeing my first show at Out Loud Theatre in their space at the Mathewson Street Church, and thinking: This is an event. Kira Hawkridge and her troop of actors understand the value of bells and whistles — and when to employ them — but they also know when to pull back and let the storyteller be the magnet that pulls an audience in. Never underestimate what you can do with less. This is a lesson every theater artist needs to learn, because even when the future was at its brightest, it's never been a bad idea to figure out how much you can take away from a story without losing the thread while still creating something visceral and evocative. Out Loud has been doing it a for a few years now, and I imagine they're going to keep doing it for years to come.

If I had my way, every city and town in Rhode Island would have a theater in it. Now, at this point, most do, but we're not quite there yet. Nevertheless, there are theaters who exist in a place, and then there are theaters of that place. Institutions that truly understand what it means to represent and serve a community. The obvious examples are the community theaters that have been working tirelessly for decades to bring the arts right to people's doorsteps in accessible and approachable ways. So often, we discount these theaters, but in many ways, they're the ones who do the most when it comes to creating lifelong audiences — organizations like the Community Players in Pawtucket, the Players at the Barker Playhouse, Swamp Meadow, Little Theater of Fall River, TRIST, Bristol Theatre Company, and RISE to name just a few. If you've been paying attention, you've noticed the work they do getting more and more interesting as they adapt to a saturated market. They're developing clear points of view and picking plays that are challenging while still appealing to their respective communities. Keep an eye on them as time unfolds. I don't think it will be long before the line that separates these theaters from

bigger ones with more resources becomes blurry.

While we're on the subject of having a point of view, I think I should mention that having a certain style and set of opinions is going to become more essential than having a mission statement. The Contemporary Theatre in Wakefield is probably one of the most underrated gems in the state of Rhode Island — and what's more, one of the most financially stable gems, theater or otherwise — and as they grow, they're developing a clear brand that offers them enough room to grow in a lot of interesting directions. If you're like me, you're probably already sick of the word "brand," but it's not going anywhere, and theaters would do well to take a cue from CTC and start working on their own brands — and that goes way beyond marketing. It's about looking at the work you produce and not just asking who you're making it for, but why? If that sounds like I'm saying you need to justify why you exist — you're right.

If you're reading this, you probably believe — like I do — that the arts are vital, but I doubt there's going to be a day when we don't have to fight to exist, so we'd better be ready for that fight when it comes. We'd better be ready to explain what we're doing here — and why.

There are reasons to be excited about theater in Rhode Island. Aside from the groups I've already mentioned, there's still more to take in and experience.

Burbage Theater Company gets better every year with seasons that walk the line between crowd-pleasing and wonderfully uncommon. Their recent production of *Shakespeare in Love* is among the best of anything Rhode Island has to offer.

Head Trick Theatre is a great example of a group that's offering something new and unique to the downtown arts scene. A recent production of *Watch on the Rhine* was one of the most sophisticated and intimate productions I've seen all year. They've become the go-to theater for excavating lost theatrical treasures and making them shine.

The Academy Players have just opened a glorious new space with a production of *Newsies* that proves the next generation of talent in Rhode Island is not only promising, it is ferocious. There's an army of performers just waiting to emerge, and luckily for us, Academy is giving artists of all ages a training ground to do it.

Mixed Magic Theatre continues to be a benchmark of creating theater and music in Rhode Island that should be spoken of in the same breath as Trinity for its resilience and commitment to the arts. Want to know how to make sure you're still around in 10 years? It might just take whatever magic they've been cultivating in Pawtucket all these years — demonstrating the vitality of theater within a given community.

We've got the Wilbury Theatre Group's innovative and invigorating work in Providence that comes with Providence's own Fringe Festival. Warwick can now lay claim to The Gamm Theatre — where they've showed no signs of watering down their work, and instead produce firecracker productions like *Gloria*.

There are Improv Festivals, Broadway-style musicals at Theatre by the Sea, the juggernaut PVD Fest, college productions at schools like PC and URI that could rival the best of the best anywhere in the country, and every once in a while *Wicked* strolls through PPAC, and I guess there's nothing wrong with that.

All this is to say that if we keep doing what we're doing, that's still plenty to be proud of, but if things get tougher — and they will — we'll need to figure out how to cast a brighter spotlight on all the things that make theater in Rhode Island not just neat, but necessary.

We live in a state where people like to complain. They like to talk negatively about what gets made here, and that, naturally, leads to lots of stuff being imported — including talent. And at the risk of sounding provincial, we need to start championing our artists and our art. We need to start recognizing that what we create here is unique, and its uniqueness is what makes it necessary.

If we do that, someone might just ask me to write another article like this in twenty years.

Here's hoping.

Curt Columbus, Trinity Artistic Director, Provides Full Experiences with the '18 - '19 Season

One of my favorite conversations as part of the AD's World series was the conversation I had with Curt Columbus about Trinity Rep's 2017 - 2018 Season. Curt was nice enough to sit down with me again and discuss the 2018 - 2019 season, which has already kicked off with a record-breaking production of "Pride & Prejudice."

Kevin Broccoli: Let's talk about the season as a whole. I know the theme deals with monsters. Did that come about in a particular way? Did you arrive at the theme first or did the shows come first, and that was a commonality you found in all of them?

Curt Columbus: This question is always so hard to answer. The world is so outsized right now, and everywhere we look, everything seems to be happening on almost a mythic scale. And sometimes, mythic in a "Holy s***" kind of way. So we were really just thinking about the size of the stories we were telling. And we were thinking a lot about how human resilience was something we wanted to explore with the whole season. That when things seem to be at their worst, humans find a way to be resilient within that. That's in every single one of the plays we're doing this year. So I don't know if we discovered that until they all started to sit next to each other. The world started asking us to tell certain stories.

KB: I went back and looked at the interview we did last year where we talked about the big three themes that were the focal points of the 2017 - 2018 season: labor, immigration, and women and war. One of the things that struck me about this season was that it seems like last season was all about people being crushed under this class structure, and when I looked at the shows for this year, it looks like people in that same class or that same predicament negotiating how to get out of it, whether by

making supernatural deals or romantic deals, figuring out how to elevate themselves.

CC: That's certainly true - negotiating with power. Sometimes it's negotiating with the power or powers that have control of things. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Song of Summer* both have that. Where this person finds that society is asking things of them that they not sure they want, and so how do they negotiate that?

KB: And there's a speech in every show from one character to another where a character of a higher stature says to the lead character: "You are where you are and you're not getting anywhere else." I thought it was an interesting progression to go from a season of people who were at the mercy of their surroundings to now starting to see characters like Lizzie Bennett saying, "That's not good enough for me."

CC: That's the hope, right? I think, in the zeitgeist, there's this sense of "Wake up — and do! Participate. Involve. Activate." So that is definitely thematic in what we're doing this year.

KB: How did you decide what was going to open the season?

CC: I just really wanted to start with a play that was a contemporary adaptation of a class. We've been doing that for a number of years — *Grapes of Wrath*, *Beowulf*, *All the King's Men* — we've often started our season with a classic story that has a really unique, contemporary point of view.

Kate Hamill — she's an actor. She's an actor/playwright, who understands that the play is a component in the final production. And it's fascinating when you look at her script — that cast of characters page — it's really clear that she's saying gender is something that is not going to be a constant. So men are playing women, women are playing men — it's all right there. So when I talked to her about the script, back at the very beginning, I said, "I feel like our production is going to complicate gender even more," and she said, "Great. That's what I want."

KB: The other thing that jumped out at me is that almost all of the shows are in some way elaborate collaborations. There's a musical, which of course has various moving parts, and Kate Hamill adapting Jane Austen, the conversation happening between *An Iliad* and *Black Odyssey*. It seems like there's a lot of focus on the communal aspect of creating art.

CC: What I love about all the shows this season is that they're all incredibly theatrical, which is to say, reading them as a text is only one component. So it's not the experience of sitting in a library reading a book by yourself.

KB: It feels celebratory.

CC: An event. It's a series of events. That's really what we're trying to do — an entire season of event theater.

KB: Disney says, "We're only doing tentpoles."

CC: In a lot of ways, that's what we're doing this season. Each production is an event unto itself.

KB: My favorite thing to ask — and you were open about this last year — was there anything you wanted to do that didn't come together or had to be shelved?

CC: I can't remember what my response was last year.

KB: You said *Mamma Mia*.

:: Kidding ::

CC: It's funny, because we had a whole slate of plays — none of which survived. So in November, we were like, "We got it," and then two of them fell out, and then everything changed. Suddenly the narrative of the whole season — at this point, I don't remember what those things are.

KB: Is there a particular project that you can't wait to see come together?

CC: I'm really excited about all of them for different reasons, but I'm personally excited to get to do the Scottish play, because it's only the second time I've gotten to do Shakespeare since I got here. It's the play that's all over my office and I'm not going into rehearsal until January 1. It's the play that I was in when I was 12-years-old that started my love for the theater. I'm reading a book that I highly recommend to everyone. It's called "Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics" and the author's name is Stephen Greenblatt. He's a Harvard professor and he's basically writing about our political time, but saying, "What's good governance and what's bad governance, and the two examples he uses are Richard III and the Scottish play." So I'm doing a play that's really about — not our political process today, but people's response to our political process.

KB: So how do you arrive at choosing a show for that slot?

CC: It's going to sound so weird — I was watching Michael Cohen in the spring or early fall of last year. This is when he was still the good soldier, and being the good soldier, I thought of the beginning of *Macbeth*. And I don't want anyone to misunderstand me — *Macbeth* isn't Michael Cohen, but I was watching that play out and I thought, "Oh, this is the beginning of the good soldier fighting the good fight and taking all of the blows," and it turns out — that doesn't end well.

KB: It's also a play where they're all complicit in their own demise.

CC: The thing that I'm going to explore with my production is how if the Thane of Glamis were not the one to take up the sword against Duncan, any other person might have. Anyone in that court. I'm setting it in a nightclub. I have a live DJ. This idea of dark, slightly scary places that are also exciting — and the kinds of people that hang out in those places that might, in our common parlance, be called gangsters. I'm interested in that.

KB: When we talked last time, it was the beginning of last season, and I was so excited for *Ragtime*. Does having a success with something like that embolden you going forward?

CC: The thing about *Ragtime* that was so great is that it's the culmination of several years of conversations that we've been having around equity diversity and inclusion here at the theater about the work broadly, and that's not visible to anyone, right? No one in the public sees that. What they saw was a really good show that moves them. I can't tell you how many people have told me that it moved them. Great. That's what we wanted it to do. But we're having these larger conversations that are really starting to fund the work that we do on our stages in a really interesting way. I want it to embolden us generally and make us — it's not even about risk, it's about deepening engagement. Asking our community harder questions and they seem ready to do that. And I feel like it's my job as a director to

give the audience a really full, interesting, unexpected experience every time.

Audiences Are in Love with Shakespeare in Love



Shakespeare in Love has had an interesting journey to the stage. It's not uncommon for movies to get theatrical adaptations, and in this case, the film was written by Tom Stoppard and deals with the greatest playwright of all time — so in that sense, it's a natural fit.

What makes this story about Shakespeare, writer's block and the love that lifts all creative hindrances is that it was originally adapted with an eye on Broadway, only to have those plans scrapped in favor of a production in London and regional licensing that helped it become one of the most produced plays in the country.

So it's no wonder that eventually it was going to make its way to Rhode Island. The question was, which company would snatch it up first?

Well, rejoice theatergoers, because it's landed exactly where it belongs — in the hands of one of Rhode Island's best interpreters of the Bard and his multiverse. Jeff Church and Burbage Theatre Company have kicked off the theater season with a production so full of celebratory spirit and dramatic panache, you'll find yourself making friends with the person sitting next to you at intermission just so you can talk about how delightful it is.

The play itself is pretty faithfully adapted from the film by Lee Hall, based on the screenplay by Stoppard and Marc Norman. Shakespeare seems stuck in a rut. He can't seem to get moving on a new

play he's writing titled *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. Then, enter Viola. A fan of Shakespeare's who wins him over first in disguise as an actor named Thomas Kent, then as herself at a ball where she is being betrothed to Lord Wessex, a sneering, down-on-his-luck aristocrat. Soon, Shakespeare's company finds that their play is improving immensely as the playwright finds himself, well, in love.

If all of this sounds downright Shakespearean, that's part of the fun. Remember, Shakespeare created a cinematic universe before there was cinema. One would think this company has been preparing to produce this play since their inception, considering they just came off a wildly successful run of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* and just last season turned *Twelfth Night* on its head in the very best way.

For those of you who don't know a thing about Shakespeare, don't worry — there's still plenty for you to enjoy.

It should be noted that season openers are usually the hardest shows to program. How do you begin a year in a way that welcomes new audiences and pleases those who've been following you all along?

In this case, Burbage has chosen a show that exemplifies one of the things they excel at — creating an ensemble.

With a cast of nearly 20, every single actor in the show is working together like a finely oiled machine. If I didn't know better, I would think they'd been performing this play for years.

Leading the pack are Dillon Medina, one of the finest actors in the state, getting a chance to carry a play and making it look effortless. His Shakespeare travels from tortured to triumphant and hits all the right notes along the way. His relationship with Viola is enchanting and lovely to watch. Alison Russo makes Viola more than just an ingenue. She's a fiery leading lady with a point of view all her own. Her more vulnerable moments are heartbreaking and haunting. The final scene of R&J between her and Medina has a moment in it so gutsy I wish they would just stage the whole thing so I can see how Church would direct the rest of it as well.

Speaking of Church, he turns in a small but smashing performance as Marlowe. The Cyrano-inspired scene between him, Medina and Russo was a pleasure to watch. He and Medina have acted onstage together many times now, and it's evident. They have a familiarity with each other that helps solidify the relationship between these two friends and competitors.

With each production, Burbage seems to up its technical game, and this show is no different. The costumes — designed by Church, Jessica Winward and Morgan Clark, and coordinated by Clark — are worthy of their own ovation. Winward also does a spectacular job with the lighting. The challenge with a play like this is that it still harkens back to a film's way of presenting a story, which involves short scenes that travel around a room and back-and-forth between locations. Winward's lighting design helps direct your attention where it needs to go, and between the design and director, the show flows seamlessly from scene to scene. The set design by Trevor Elliot is straightforward and stunning, as always. Elliot's merging of function and form is what makes his work such a standout.

This would be the part of the review where I say that there are too many other actors in the show to mention and then list one or two, but to hell with that, I'm going to mention all of them, because they deserve it. In no particular order: Rae Mancini is a fierce and fabulous Queen Elizabeth. Andrew Stigler

has a truly touching arc as the finance behind Shakespeare's play, only to fall in love with the magic of theater. James Lucey makes for a sinister Lord Wessex, but you can also sense the desperation he's experiencing as a man who has only one hope of having a future. His scenes with Russo are precise and on-point.

Patrick Keeffe seems as though he was born to play Ned. He enters like a bolt of electricity and his fight with Nicholas Menna as Richard Burbage is a highlight of the play. Menna makes Burbage both grumpy and lovable, which makes his pivot late in the play all the more enjoyable. Gabrielle McCauley, Brian Kozak, Helena Tafuri, Andrew Iacovelli, Nick Griffin, Brian McGuirk, Aaron Blanck and Cassidy McCarten are all working at the top of their game. Jack Clark as Wabash is truly touching, and as a Boatsman in one of the play's best scenes, he's a riot. Roger Lemelin has one of my favorite characters in the show — the crafty and catty Mr. Henslowe — and he makes it his own with perfect comic timing.

Now, if you're one of those people who asks why they keep making plays or musicals out of movies, you should know that *Shakespeare in Love* is one of my favorite films, and Medina and Russo are doing a far better job in this play than Fiennes and Paltrow did in the movie.

Actually, this might be one of the rare cases where the play improves upon the film, if only because it seems so much better-suited to being performed instead of screened. The intimate, in-the-round staging makes you glad we have companies like Burbage in the area where you can see every glance passed between actors — every moment up close.

Theater, at its best, can either entertain or enlighten us, but in some rare cases, shows can do both. With *Shakespeare in Love*, Burbage is proving that you don't need to present low-hanging fruit to attract big crowds. Their run is already selling out shows left and right, and I suspect it will continue to do so. They've added another smart, sophisticated and sexy show to their growing history of successful productions, and if you haven't checked them out yet, this would be a wonderful introduction to their work.

In other words, skip the movie, see the play and say hello to the person sitting next to you. I bet you two are going to have a lot to talk about.

Shakespeare in Love runs through Sep 16 at Burbage Theatre Company, 249 Roosevelt Ave, Pawtucket. For information, go to burbagetheatre.org

2nd Story, Take a Bow



There are better people than me who could be writing this.

I acted in far fewer shows at 2nd Story Theatre than a lot of actors in this area, and directed only two. In its illustrious history, I was a participant for only a decade. The first show I acted in there was in the summer 2008 — although it speaks to what kind of opportunities the theater presented to local talent that somebody could go from sitting in the audience to directing a production in such a short time.

There doesn't seem to be any way to write some in-depth piece on the theater as an artist without it being one of those indulgent pieces that hops from "And then I did this — and then that" and nobody wants to read one of those — myself included.

So when *Motif* asked me to write something, I quickly came to the conclusion that the only way to write about 2nd Story, or really any theater, was to write about it as an audience member. As one of those people sitting in the seats who knows nothing about the backstage drama or institutional changes that exist at every theater. While I'm sure whole books could be written about the history of an organization that existed for as long as 2nd Story did, I have only an article, so I'll keep it as brief as I can, and talk about what I saw from my seat in the audience (and it was always a great seat).

Unfortunately, I can only go back as far as the building in Warren, although I'm not unaware of everything that came before it. What Pat Hegnauer and Ed Shea created in the state is now the stuff of legend, and Pat, in particular, should have received piles of accolades while she was alive for what she achieved as a woman in the Rhode Island theater community — one that still suffers from a lack of female leadership. I don't know if the people who choose the Pell Awards are reading this, but not recognizing her while she was alive has to be one of their biggest missteps.

When 2nd Story was brought back to life in Warren, it took off by immediately establishing itself as irreverent with a fun approach to theater and theater-going. Short Attention Span theater arrived just as we as a culture were starting to figure out just how short attention spans were really getting. I remember first hearing about it as a college student.

"There's a theater that lets you eat popcorn while you watch the show."

My ears perked up. I had to check this place out.

The theater wouldn't seem that far outside of Providence to anyone not from Providence, but a Rhode Islander might find the drive to Warren a little out-of-the-way.

"What kind of theater are they doing out here?" I thought.

This was before Warren became the blossoming arts and culinary hotspot it is today, and something I would argue 2nd Story is almost solely responsible for — another long-overdue bit of appreciation.

Parking was easy to find.

The building was charming.

You immediately felt at home and comfortable when you walked in.

At that point, I had just started making the trek to New York to see Broadway and off-Broadway shows, and I remember thinking that 2nd Story borrowed a lot from the off-Broadway model while dispensing with the cold “edge” that sometimes accompanied more intimate theaters. There wasn’t yet air-conditioning or fancy sets or even an elevator. The seating was strictly directors’ chairs with the names of benefactors on them. The ushers were — and still are — some of the friendliest front of house people I’ve ever encountered, and I was surprised to find out some of them were high-ranking members of the staff who thought nothing of treating an 18-year-old kid as though he were one of the theater’s biggest donors. When it comes to front house, 2nd Story was the gold standard.

Now the fun part—

We get to talk about the shows.

It’s clichéd to say there are too many amazing productions and performances to mention, but that’s the honest truth. Still, there are some that simply have to be evoked.

Let’s start with Bob Colonna in *Death of a Salesman*. You could arguably start with Bob Colonna in just about anything, but even though I may not be an expert on Willy Loman, I’ve seen seven different actors play him onstage and on film, and I will make the case that Bob Colonna was the best I’ve ever seen. He followed it up with a performance as Joe Keller in *All My Sons* that was equally earth-shaking.

Also in that production was Lynne Collinson as his wife, Kate. If the Rhode Island theater community has a collective matriarch, I think many people would feel safe saying that it’s Lynne. Her kindness and compassion was almost totally absent as Kate, so much so that when I saw her working the box office at the next show, I was almost too afraid to tell her how much I liked her performance. I couldn’t get over how this lovely woman turned in such a fiery and fierce portrayal. Little did I know at the time that she was the beating heart of that organization, serving as a cheerleader and champion not just of that theater and all who stepped into it, but other small organizations in the area as well, and she still is to this day.

I still use that production as an example of a show done with few resources that soared because of its commitment to acting and storytelling.

All My Sons was the show that had me grabbing friends on the street saying, “Have you been to 2nd Story? You *need* to go 2nd Story.”

Over the next few years, I’d dream about becoming an actor there, but in the meantime, I took my place in the audience and watched as stellar theater was made over and over again.

There were shows like *Tartuffe*, where John Michael Richardson gave one of the funniest performances

I've ever seen — thrashing on a shag carpet like a glorious madman. The second funniest performance I've ever seen also happened at 2nd Story — Dillon Medina in *A Flea in Her Ear*, the first of many runaway productions that sold so well it became legend.

Legendary would also be the word to describe Joanne Fayan in *Auntie Mame*. Joanne was the definition of a star in that role, and the production managed to create an event using only two criss-crossing red carpets and a performance from then child-actor Evan Kinnane so good I sat there wondering if he was some kind of living magic trick. The boy made a martini onstage with the ease of Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*. It was instantly iconic.

There was Erin Olson in *The Miracle Worker* in a role I'd always seen done as a kind of throwaway, turned into something touching and unforgettable. Tim White in *Desire Under the Elms*, a performance and a play that only the bravest of theaters would tackle. Aaron Morris in *Of Mice and Men* giving a beating heart to a character who so often is done as a caricature. Rae Mancini and Kyle Maddock in *A Month in the Country* redefining chemistry in a play that had no business being that sexy. Christin L. Goff in *The Heiress* establishing herself as a force to be reckoned with for years to come. Lara Hakeem in *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, breaking your heart into a million pieces then making you laugh 10 seconds later. Eric Behr and Vince Petronio in *Inherit the Wind* in one of 2nd Story's first productions at the Bristol Courthouse — proof that searing theater can be done just about anywhere.

Once I started acting there, I would still marvel at the shows I was seeing. Being friendly with the actors didn't do anything to deter my admiration for the people I was seeing onstage. Jeff Church in *Lobby Hero*, Valerie Westgate in *Speech & Debate*, Ara Bohigian in *Take Me Out*, William Oakes in *Prelude to a Kiss* (and just about anything else — the man is a gift), Andrew Iacovelli in *Amadeus*, Sharon Carpentier and Ben Church in *The Goat* (2nd Story did *The Goat*, a play even I'm terrified to do, and those who know me will understand what a compliment that is), Gabby Sherba in *School for Wives*, Amy Thompson and Joan Dillenback in *The Miracle Worker*, Rachel Morris in *The Underpants*, Juli Parker in *Auntie Mame*, Carol Schlink in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, Emily Lewis in *Frankie and Johnnie*, Will Valles in *Kimberly Akimbo*, Jonathan Jacobs in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (no words; he didn't need them), Wayne Kneeland in *Fuddy Meers*, Gloria Crist in *Master Class*, Gayle Hanrahan in *Short Attention Span Theater*, Liz Hallenbeck in *The Foreigner*, Margaret Melozzi in *Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, Ashley Hunter Kenner in *Catholic School Girls*, Tom Roberts and Joan Batting in *An Inspector Calls*, Sandra Laub in *Golda's Balcony*, Laura Sorenson in *Comic Potential*, every single person in *August: Osage County*, and Paula Faber in *Becky Shaw*, a performance so good they should have filmed it and taught it in acting schools.

There were the people behind the scenes, who even as an observer, were visible as being the cogs and wheels that made the place turn — people like Lynne and Paula, Peggy Becker, Jon Connery, Michael Abbruzzi, Charles Lafond and Ryan Maxwell. Ron Cesario, whose costumes were so good they got entrance applause. Trevor Elliott, whose sets were the perfect combination of flawless and functional. Richard Dionne, who snapped so many good photos I'm still holding out hope for an exhibit. And of course, Max Ponticelli, who did everything but warm up your car for you in the winter — and he probably did do that a few times, if we're being honest.

These are the people who arrive in my mind when I think of 2nd Story Theater. All of them were local artists who demonstrated that you don't need to go to New York City and bring back Broadway actors to create work that's meaningful and satisfying. The theater itself was proof that great art can be found anywhere from a courtroom in Bristol to a storeroom over a restaurant in Newport to a 100-year-old

building in Warren where actors would paint sets, wait tables at the restaurant downstairs, then perform in a 10-minute play by Durang all in one day.

It's a testament to what can be done through sheer determination and the urge all of us feel to tell a good story.

If you went to 2nd Story, you wouldn't find any pictures on the walls of past shows or memorable moments. It was something that always made me a little sad, but I understood the meaning behind it. There was a firm belief that theater should be of and for the moment. There was no living on sentiment or resting on past laurels. If you wanted to exist, you had to create and keep creating, and if you stumbled, you got back on your feet and tried a little harder the next time. You had to make events — not just good theater. The people buying the tickets had to feel like they were there for something special. It's a tall order, but one all theaters should set for themselves.

The moment for 2nd Story may now be coming to a close, but I know I'm just one audience member among many, many others who will never forget what it brought into my life. The theater was kept going primarily by the people who wanted to see it thrive and survive because they felt it spoke to them in unique and special way. It made them feel welcome. It got them to laugh. It let them eat popcorn.

I can't think of a better legacy than that.

New Works Take the Stage at Counter Productions



Counter Productions Theatre Company is kicking off a series of new works that represents a broad scope of story and local talent.

"I'm a serious fan of all of the playwrights we've worked with," says Counter Productions artistic

director Theodore Clement, "To enable the creative theatrical process from the first draft to final production is the most fulfilling experience to be had in our craft."

First up is *Le Dernier Repas: A Love Story* by David Eliet. "The play follows two Frenchmen, Robert and Louis, sitting down for the lavish meal of their dreams. Set against the backdrop of the Holocaust, the two reminisce on lost love, family, friendship and food." Eliet is one of Rhode Island's most notable playwrights, and a new work by him is always an event.

"*Le Dernier Repas* was the result of 10 years of writing about The Holocaust that started in 1994 when I met Magda Bednarova in Bratislava, Slovak Republic," says Eliet. "She had saved the life of her then boyfriend, and her husband had saved 200 Jewish lives."

In addition to seeing Geoff Leatham back at CPTC after his incredible performance in *Waiting for Godot*, Clement himself is stepping onstage to take on the other role.

"I was drawn to the beautifully written characters, and their uncanny ability to celebrate what they love despite their incredibly difficult circumstances," says Clement.

Isabella by David J. Valentin is a work with which Counter Productions has had a long-standing relationship —developing the show over time with readings and feedback. "*Isabella* is a deeply personal expression of David's viewpoint on love and family," says Clement. "It possesses a raw and brutal honesty that is genuinely compelling."

Similar to their "Readings in Autumn" series, this year Counter Productions has devoted its entire Readings series to women playwrights. Artistic director of Out Loud Theatre Kira Hawkrige will be helming *The Analog Play* by Diane Exavier on May 17.

"This play deconstructs our depersonalized keyboard culture, and the way that it effects our most intimate interactions," says Clement. "I'm fascinated by Diane's almost mystical portrayal of internet dating and sexuality, and the ways that it creates distance rather than connection."

Stalking by Jayne Hannah will close out the CPTC Season. It's being directed by Victoria Ezikovich who audiences will remember from her fantastic performance in the theater's world premiere of *Kill the Virgin*.

"[*Stalking*] is dark and violent, and extremely well-written," says Clement. "It deals in deception and possesses a twisty plot. It's a terrific opportunity for the actors involved. Definitely not for young audiences."

With four brand new plays in store for the coming months and a residency in the heart of downtown Providence, Counter Productions has become the go-to place for new work that tackles relevant themes from contemporary voices.

Let's Talk About Critics

Hedy Weiss, a theater critic from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, caused an uproar when, in a review for Steppenwolf Theatre's production of *Pass Over* by Antoinette Nwandu, she wrote the following:

To be sure, no one can argue with the fact that this city (and many others throughout the country) has a problem with the use of deadly police force against African-Americans. But, for all the many and varied causes we know so well, much of the lion's share of the violence is perpetrated within the community itself. Nwandu's simplistic, wholly generic characterization of a racist white cop (clearly meant to indict all white cops) is wrong-headed and self-defeating. Just look at news reports about recent shootings (on the lakefront, on the new River Walk, in Woodlawn) and you will see the look of relief when the police arrive on the scene.

Weiss has a history of making problematic statements in her reviews, but this time Steppenwolf decided they'd had enough. The theater made the unusual decision to refuse Weiss free tickets to their productions, and advocated that other theaters do the same. The *Chicago Sun-Times* stood by Weiss, indicating that while they might not agree with what she had to say about race as it pertained to the play, they felt refusing tickets to and/or banning a critic from reviewing a performance is a violation of free speech. The American Theatre Critics Association echoed that sentiment, although they did acknowledge that the existence of such a review is partly due to the lack of diversity found among critics in their organization and throughout the country.

In the midst of thinking about all of this, I had the pleasure of seeing the two productions that opened Trinity Repertory Company's latest season: *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller and *Skeleton Crew* by Dominique Morisseau. While there was much to admire about both productions, I was particularly struck by the urgency of *Skeleton Crew*. It's rare to encounter a show that presents issues with such immediacy, and allows characters to embody those issues who are of the present day. Characters so real and so beautifully drawn and performed that you wonder if you're watching actors on a stage or the filming of a documentary. While watching *Salesman*, the audience can hear echoes from the past that still resonate today; in *Skeleton Crew* the echoes were roars of the present. While most theater strives to achieve a certain degree of relevancy, I found Morisseau's play to be as relevant as a fire alarm in a burning building. It was a stunning evening of theater.

Not that you'd know that if you read most of the reviews for it.

With one or two exceptions, an army of straight, white, male critics descended upon both shows and heartily labeled *Salesman* the victor of some unseen battle Trinity probably wasn't aware it was waging with itself. They found somebody to champion in Willy Loman (no surprise there) and couldn't quite connect with the story of Faye and her co-workers at an auto stamping plant in Detroit.

Now, before you go thinking this is going to be a piece about bashing critics, I want to say that I actually like many of the critics in this area, which some people might consider a miracle since I run a local theater company. When I talk about being friendly with the critics who come to review my shows, I occasionally get the same look someone might give a chicken mentioning his fondness for foxes.

I should also mention that a producer of theater making any sort of public statement about critics would normally be labeled a fool — and rightfully so. After all, most theaters still depends heavily on critics to sell their shows — and we'll get to that in a bit. In the meantime, feel free to label me a fool. I'm a theater person — it won't be the first time I've heard it.

This is not a piece about bashing critics, but it is about the problems we face with critics. I was flummoxed to see that none of the men writing about *Skeleton Crew* seemed even remotely willing to entertain the idea that perhaps the reason they enjoyed *Death of a Salesman* so much was because it was easier for them to relate to it. In other words, I agree with the ACTA that there's a bigger obstacle afoot in terms of diversity, but what about empathy, as well? If you're reviewing theater, shouldn't stepping inside someone else's mind and soul be a vital skill needed for the job? I don't presume to say these men should be able to understand what it might be like for blue collar workers dealing with the closure of an auto plant, but their writing was drenched with what can only be described as resistance — a resistance to even allow themselves to eavesdrop on that world for a bit, and maybe learn a thing or two. Personally, I found it to be negligent, lazy and frustrating. I can only imagine what those involved in that brilliant production must have felt.

While none of the local critics said anything as vile as Ms. Weiss did when reviewing *Pass Over*, the lack of empathy shown by them and the racist agenda carried by her are not that far apart. As far as the actions taken by Steppenwolf, I believe it's their theater and they can invite or not invite anybody they like to review their shows, especially if it means giving that person free tickets. If the *Sun-Times* or another publication wants to have a reviewer see the production who hasn't been invited, then I think they should be able to buy a ticket and then write about it. As far as banning someone from the theater altogether, I wouldn't advocate for that unless the person was actually dangerous, although I do find the opinions that Ms. Weiss is spouting to be treacherous in their own way, especially when they're supported by an organization as powerful and respected as the *Sun-Times*.

This ends up being one of those issues that causes people talking about it to lean one way or the other, never quite falling on one side, but temporarily visiting each for a brief period of time.

From what I can tell based on reading every article I could find on the subject, nobody seems to like what Ms. Weiss said, but many people are adamant that she should be allowed to say it, even if the platform she's been given to do so is highly influential.

American Theatre Magazine recently devoted an entire issue to the problem of critics in America. As the political climate we find ourselves in gets more and more tense, newspapers and other publications are scaling back arts writing. We find that happening right now in Rhode Island. Our theater scene has exploded over the past few years, and what's been the critical response? To be fair, you might be seeing more reviews being written, but features are still highly coveted and very rare. This might be because *The Providence Journal* pays less for features than they do for reviews, which is truly bizarre.

About a year ago, I actually heard a critic at a press night exclaim, "There's just too much theater going on right now!" I remember thinking that would be like hearing a cinephile complaining about too many films, but for that analogy to work, you'd have to believe that many of the people who write about theater in this area truly enjoy doing so — and I'm not sure that's the case.

The ones who do enjoy it appear to have real trouble explaining why they do. That means even when a review is good, it's rarely more than a plot summary with a few upbeat adjectives tagged onto the end. Never mind the odd negative review with a positive headline that seems to be the paper's way of saying

"We feel bad about how mean this piece is, so we're going to spin it as best we can that way you have something to put on the poster." I once read a review where the headline used the word "Phenomenal" even though that word appeared nowhere in the actual review and the critic didn't even seem to like the play that much. Wow, I thought, somewhere an editor really went out on a limb. I wonder if his niece is in the show.

Sometimes I wonder if we should all just give up and let critics give each production a letter grade instead of forcing them to write what oftentimes amounts to little more than a book report. At least that would be better than that awful moment when a theater artist finishes a review so meandering and wobbly they wonder whether or not to share it with friends because they're not quite sure if it's good, bad, or something in between.

So what's to be done?

For starters, we need to stop relying on critics to sell shows. Let's have everyone sit down with their marketing departments and tell them to lay off the quotes carefully edited with ellipses to convey nothing but praise. Let's tell our actors and admin staff to stop jumping on social media whenever a critic loves one of their shows to champion what a genius he or she is. Inevitably, when that same critic pans the next show, there are shouts and complaints about what a moron they are, but the truth is, we in the theater community like to have it both ways, and it's simply not possible in a world where you can Google the last show a critic liked and see how happy the theater was using that praise to unload a few more tickets.

I would need much more space to tackle whether good reviews still sell shows the way some theater administrators and marketing experts in the area would argue they do. I can only speak from personal experience when I say that I've seen shows with positive critical feedback flounder and shows that got a poor reception from the press become commercial successes. Some productions sell out before the critics even get a chance to review them due to title value or some other magic factor. I think you could do a production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Aramaic with circus clowns and still have it run for years.

I'm sure to an audience of a certain age, there's still some allure left in getting tickets to something *The Journal* raved about, but that audience is getting smaller, and those in the younger demographics don't usually make their decisions based on something they read in a newspaper. You're better off hiring 50 20-year-olds to talk about your show on social media than you are cozying up to a *Motif* contributor on opening night.

Critics and the papers they write for only have as much power as the theaters they're writing about give them. It's a relationship — although, of course, the critics probably wouldn't want to admit that. Neil Simon used to say that a critic's job is to help better the work and to better the audience's understanding of the work, not simply to judge it and comment on how nice the costumes were. Perhaps we got ourselves into trouble when we started calling critics "reviewers" and their work "reviews." A review and a piece of criticism are two completely different things when you think about what the word "review" means versus what the word "critique" implies. Maybe if we start demanding more from our critics, we'll start seeing them aim higher.

Or maybe we won't.

The New Age of Criticism is probably not going to exist in the form of articles in the Sunday paper, but blog entries spread out all over the internet, and I'm not sure that's an entirely bad thing. If we can't

guarantee quality from the small group of people we have writing for us now, then maybe casting a wider net will get better results. If it means that people with more diverse backgrounds will feel more comfortable expressing their opinion about theater, I'm all for it. I'm sure we'll get a few more like Hedy Weiss in the mix, but at least their power won't be so prevalent. If nothing else, it means people will have to show up at the theater so they can keep up with the conversation.

For years, the joke has been, "Everyone's a critic." Wouldn't it be funny if that was the solution after all?

The views expressed are not necessarily those of Motif.

A Conversation About Church

[See "Wilbury's *Church*: Drinking the Kool-Aid" for our review.]

Motif writer Kevin Broccoli talks with Brien Lang and Phoenix Williams — the director and the lead actor of Young Jean Lee's *Church* currently playing at the Wilbury Group.

Kevin Broccoli: What I find so interesting about *Church* is that it's a play and an actual church service rolled into one. As a director and an actor, how do you approach an unconventional piece like this?

Brien Lang: Unconventional is putting it lightly; there was a lot of discussion early on in the process as to what our approach would be. Fortunately, Wilbury already has a relationship with Young Jean Lee, having produced *Straight White Men* last season. Given this, we were able to reach out to her and ask about taking some different directions than previous productions. Fortunately, she gave us the green light on just about everything I wanted to do, allowing us to add cast members and music and, hopefully, to enhance the whole idea of community.

Phoenix Williams: Something I really enjoy about working with Wilbury is the willingness to work with unconventional and non-traditional theater. I feel I produce my best work in these settings. In approaching *Church*, I relied heavily on my upbringing in a Baptist church and the many experiences that taught me. I was able to connect what I believed the playwright's intentions were with real-life characters and how things could have played out in real life. To be more specific, my father is a reverend and his unique approach and openness allowed me to cultivate much of the charismatic side of Rev Jose. I also grew up around other ministers and reverends that may not have shared Rev Jose's beliefs but still embraced his unique preaching style and techniques.

KB: Brien, last season you directed *Mr. Burns*, which is also unique in its structure and storytelling. What drew you to this particular piece?

BL: I am a huge fan of any work that examines why we, as artists, do what we do. The great thing about both *Burns* and *Church* is that both pieces take it one step further and really look at why we need to share experience and stories and how that shapes us as a society. While *Burns* was a sprawling, three-act piece that spanned almost a century, *Church* is an intimate 75-minute service. I feel, however, that

both pieces take serious and insightful looks at those things.

KB: Brien, music always plays a big part in your work. How did you go about choosing the music for this particular piece? I know you have Matthew Requintina working on it with you as well, and I'm sure he had suggestions. What's your working relationship like?

BL: Young Jean Lee does make several musical 'suggestions' in the piece. We ended up sticking with the more traditional gospel numbers she suggested but, with her blessing, were able to add several of our own choices. One of the things I really wanted to do with the music was include several different styles of celebratory music. In addition to the more traditional gospel numbers, we've added some great bluegrass, rock and rap numbers that will mix things up without losing any of the sincerity and earnestness that is needed to pull this show off.

Matt [Requintina] and I have worked on a few shows together now and as we both have wide ranging musical tastes and slightly twisted senses of humor. We often joke about our typical approach, which usually is, "This is such a bad idea, this might be a good idea, so why not try it?" We're constantly bouncing ideas off of each other — good, bad, ridiculous and, sometimes, all three. For this show we were also fortunate to have Meredith Healy as our assistant director and she did a lot of additional research into contemporary Christian music in a variety of styles. Meredith actually discovered the song that is one of our next to last numbers and, without giving too much away, it's been a huge hit with audiences.

KB: What was your initial reaction upon reading the script? The first time I read it, I immediately went back to the beginning and started over, because I was so eager to figure it out. What were your first thoughts, and what did you take away from it before you began working on it?

BL: I also went back to the beginning after my first reading. The play is such a fascinating mix of moral humanism, magical realism, testimony and pretty authentic preacher in left field moments that it seems, at times, to be a bit unbalanced. Fortunately, we had a very adventurous group of actors, musicians and designers onboard so we collectively had a very buckle up for a wild ride mentality, which was both needed and effective.

PW: My initial thoughts about the script were, "Hey this is nice. I can get into this." And then as I got to some of the more "creative" portions of the script I was like, "Whoa, where are we going with this?" I read it through a couple of times and still was unclear of what I had read, but I thought I had a general idea and I couldn't wait to get with Brien and discuss his plans for the performance.

KB: What was the process for this show like? Again, I know that every rehearsal process has certain constants, but did you find yourselves doing things different because of what the text called for in terms of what it was asking you to create?

BL: Once we had permission to expand the cast and add music, the process became something of a balancing act between building that ensemble in terms of music, movement and testimony, and working the big chunks of sermon that are solely Reverend Jose. In a way, the early stages were almost two different rehearsal processes; Phoenix and I spent a lot of time one-on-one working the sermons and then the other part of the process was fine-tuning the music and ensemble. We were very fortunate to have Matt running the bulk of the music as well as Ali Kenner Brodsky helping with choreography and Delbert Collins arranging and teaching the more traditional gospel numbers.

KB: Lee has said in interviews that *Church* is her grappling with religion. While working on the play, did it cause you to examine your own belief system and your feelings about the sort of issues Lee is addressing?

PW: Working on this did not challenge my belief system. It did bring to light issues I have heard many people voice in their own grappling with religion. Over the years I have attempted many times to point to passages in the Bible to help provide answers, but I will say I'm hoping my performance answers those questions where my previous attempts may have failed.

BL: We definitely had many, many discussions about religion and how it affected each of the cast and crew members. One thing that kept coming up for me was the idea that, for many of us involved in the production, making collaborative art has become our 'church' so, in many ways, putting *Church* together was how our artistic 'congregation' celebrates and connects.

KB: Brien, what were your visions for the design of the show? I've looked at photos of the set, and it seems like you wanted to keep the audience as close to the actors as possible. Is that accurate? What sort of reaction are you hoping to illicit from the audience?

BL: I definitely wanted to create a feel that would blur the performance line for the audience, in a sense, to not let them off the hook as distanced observers at a theater, but rather as invitees to an actual service, making them feel that they were a part of the action. Not in an uncomfortable way, but rather to be inclusive.

We were very lucky to have Keri King on board as our set designer. She got that concept right away and created a set that was intimate, engaging and unique.

KB: Phoenix, what has the experience been like for you as an actor now that you're in the middle of the run, and you've gotten to see an audience take in the show. Because your character addresses them directly, have you been more aware of how they're experiencing the show more than you would if you were acting in another play?

PW: The experience for me has been great. I love being able to directly engage the audience and play off of their reactions. It gets me really excited to see some of their expressions, particularly at points when I know the next line or two is going to have a unique impact on them. Like a typical church service I see audience members laughing at times, talking to one another during other times, sleeping at points, reflecting at others. I almost wish more performers had an opportunity to feel what it is like to be a shepherd addressing their flock.

KB: This time of year seems to be an appropriate time to look at what role religion plays in our lives. Do you think having the play open and run throughout December has affected the experience at all?

PW: I hoped it would, in a good way. As I have been inviting friends out to the show, one out of every three needs me to clarify that I am inviting them to a theatrical performance called *Church* and not to a Sunday Church service with me. It is my hope that people will walk away feeling like they experienced the theater's version of church, and knowing that acting is my God given talent and calling, I can say with an absolute certainty that anyone who attends this performance will be blessed.

BL: Definitely. The idea of celebration, community and taking care of each other at every level of society is an integral part of *Church* and, ideally, should be an important concept during the holiday

season.

But we also don't want things to feel too heavy or preachy, there is a lot of humor, joy and fun in this production as well. Hopefully, that will give our audience a unique holiday gift!