

Back in Business: Rhode Island theaters plan their in-person return



Photo credit: Samantha Gaus

As we wrap up our (hopefully) last pandemic season, where theaters were making the best of digital resources and innovative engagement, we're seeing more signs of in-person performing arts everyday.

This week featured *Window Dressing: A Night of Live Entertainment* in Wickford presented by the West Bay Community Theater, and had audiences taking in monologues performed in shop windows in the picturesque village. The always brilliant **Terry Shea** organized the outdoor experience, and it looked to be a great success. The Community Players of Pawtucket presented a virtual production of *The Night of January 16th*, reuniting several members of its original cast, as a tribute to the great Brian Mulvey, who directed the show in 1994.

We also got not one, but two, season announcements.

The first was from Trinity Repertory Company, which is returning with a quartet of productions and their annual *Christmas Carol*, which will be the first and only live production we see at the theater before the year is up.

In January, they'll be presenting the Rhode Island Premiere of *Tiny Beautiful Things*, based on the book by Cheryl Strayed of *Wild* fame and adapted for the stage by Nia Vardalos (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*). The play was co-conceived by Vardalos, Thomas Kail and Marshall Heyman, and it had a sold-out run at the Public Theater in New York in 2016. It's a semi-autobiographical look at Strayed's rise to popularity as the anonymous advice columnist for Dear Sugar. Artistic director Curt Columbus will direct.

August Wilson's *Radio Golf* was one of the highlights of Trinity's last in-person season, and its director, Jude Sandy, is back doing double duty on both *Gem of the Ocean* in February and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* in May. Chronologically, *Gem of the Ocean* is the first in Wilson's epic Pittsburgh Cycle. It's the playwright's most fantastical work and features the omnipresent Aunt Esther, who recurs in many of the other plays in the cycle.

Fairview not only won the Pulitzer Prize in 2018, but it is, perhaps, one of the most ambitious plays of the past 10 years. Its inaugural production blurred the line between reality and theater so well that critics wrote about audiences at some performances calling out to ask if what they were seeing was still "part of the play." It's destined to be a major event of next season, and I'm curious to see how the Trinity audiences will respond to such an adventurous work.

In between these two will be *Sueño*, José Rivera's contemporary interpretation of *Life is a Dream*, the masterpiece by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, about a young prisoner freed to either rise to glory or end up imprisoned again. As classics go, *Life is a Dream* is certainly one of the most daring titles you could choose, and Rivera is a playwright who doesn't get produced nearly enough. Trinity's stellar production of *Marisol* proved that he should be on the shortlist anytime you want to produce soul-grabbing theater. Tatyana-Marie Carlo is slated to direct in April.

Independent theaters in the area are also making plans for future productions, including two very different takes on one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies. Burbage Theatre Company has a filmed version of *Macbeth* on the way, while Psych Drama Company will be presenting an audio version in association with the Audiovisual Center Dubrovnik. The production will feature original music and soundscape by Zarko Dragojevik and an art exhibit of Nick Morse's paintings during intermission. Psych Drama's *Lion in Winter* was a standout audio experience, and they appear to be upping their game once more. They'll be following that up with a second audio production of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Meanwhile, this summer already looks jam-packed with opportunities to see outdoor theater. The Contemporary Theatre Company is planning a full summer out on their gorgeous patio, including *Bethel Park Falls* and *Native Gardens*, Mixed Magic has their amphitheater ready to go for another summer of blockbuster theater and music, and Glass Horse Project will be mounting Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

As we start to see the number of digital productions dwindle, a nice way to celebrate local arts resiliency would be to take in *Red Maple*, a digital comedy presented by the Players at the Barker Playhouse. Their virtual productions have been some of the finest of the past year, and I'm happy to check out one more.

If I've missed anybody, please let me know, and I'll be sure to mark you down in my calendar. After

spending years quietly bemoaning having so much theater to see, I can't wait to have that be my biggest problem again.

Over at my theater, we have an expression for what the next year calls for, and I might as well use it here as well.

Buckle Up.