

If a Tree Falls, Does it Make an Impact?: Motif gets the scoop on the Community Players' *A Tree Falls In Brookline*



David Crossley and Elizabeth Parent embrace in a nostalgic moment. Photo by Richard Griffin

The world premiere of *A Tree Falls in Brookline*, written by local playwright David W. Christner and directed by Richard Griffin, is a comedy you don't want to miss. Considering the Community Players are celebrating their 100th year, these folks are no strangers to quality performances. Some of the faces change, some stick around for many productions. One thing is for sure—these folks know how to put on a play!

With this particular production, we see the main character, Cormac McIntyre—skillfully portrayed by David Crossley—released from the hospital after a fallen tree limb leaves him with amnesia. He awakens to an unfamiliar world in which he cannot recall who his true friends are, whether or not he is married, and where he should go from there. Dr. Alex Warner, portrayed by C. Richard Koster, appears to be a scatterbrain himself at the VA hospital emergency room. Enter Allison (Elizabeth Parent), who slowly helps him upright his shaken world as he weeds through the deceptions as well as the truths.

Geoff White as Ripley Randolph and Camille Terilli as Gwendolyn Fairfax help create the chaos that also abounds.

Meet the Writer

World-renowned playwright David Christner may live in RI, but he's a man of the globe. He was born in Sweetwater, Tennessee and raised in rural Oklahoma. He attended high school in Mountain View, a small farming community. Christner came to RI in 1966 to attend the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport. After serving as a commissioned officer in Vietnam and two years ashore in Norfolk, VA, he attended grad school, then chose to settle here permanently.

Even though Christner has written four novels and ten screenplays, he still feels a bit apprehensive when his work goes public. "I'm at the point where I just want to go hide in a bar somewhere until it's all over," he says. "This happens every time a play opens. I have to do this! 'Everyone is just going to hate it. Why do I put myself through this?' I don't know; I can't seem to quit writing. I've tried, over and over. I just don't seem to have what it takes to quit. I wrote a new play—*The Old Man and the She*—after *Brookline*, and now I have a new idea kicking around in my head for another play." When asked if he would be present at the premiere he said, "Oh, I will be there! My wife insists that we go." Linda was indeed there by his side.

"This play came out of the blue. For reasons unknown, I decided to read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which I had avoided doing during high school. Turns out, it was first published in 1943, the year I was born. The underlying theme of the novel is perseverance, represented symbiotically in the story by the Tree of Heaven surviving all kinds of abuse growing in Brooklyn, just as Francie in the novel had to do.

"Once I finished the novel and switched the title, I was pretty sure I could write a play to fit the title. So, I thought what if a tree falls on some guy and he loses his memory. From there, the idea just took off. What if the guy was a writer? Okay, great! What writer? What writer do I know most about? Ole number one, that's who. That way I don't have to make anything up. This was the easiest play I ever wrote—three maybe four weeks from curtain rise to curtain fall, and it was a ton of fun.

"When I started, I didn't even know if there was a golf course or VA hospital in Brookline, but just before COVID-19 started I was having dinner at a friend's house and I met a guy who had grown up in Brookline. He told me that the Brookline Country Club—simply known as "The Club"—has a famous golf course and a VA hospital. I needed both for the play. And I learned just yesterday (Feb 15) the US Open Golf Tournament is being held at Brookline this year."

Speculations on the cosmos, sex, war, religion, injustice, environmental exploitation, aging, women's issues, the homeless, the colonial slave trade and capital punishment have formed the thematic content of the plays and novels Christner has written to date. His plays have been produced in the US, Australia, Japan, Belgium, India, Ghana, Singapore, Italy, Russia and Canada.

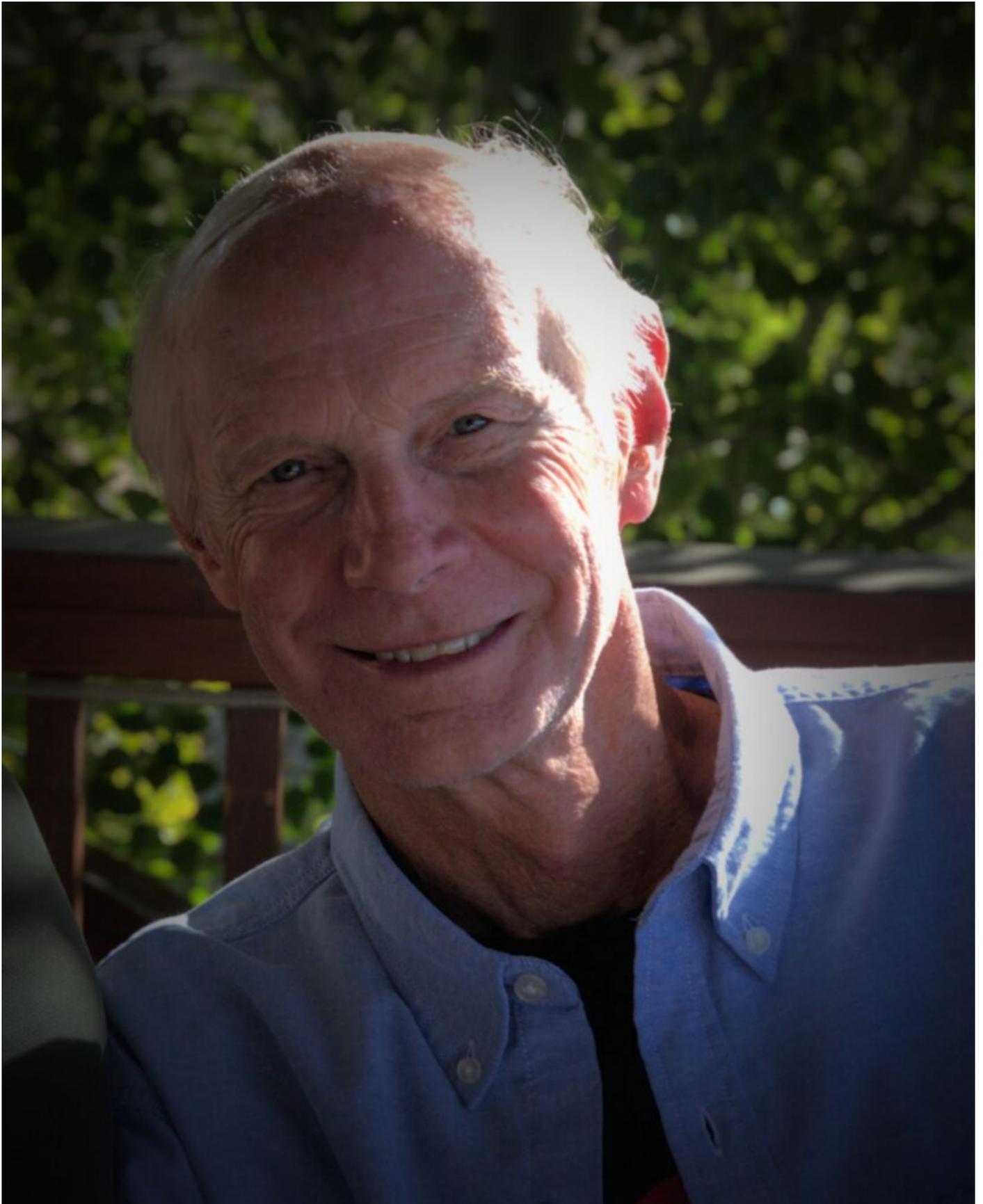
"All my plays have an important underlying theme, perseverance in this one. Although my plays deal with serious social issues, most of them are comedies because I think it is much easier for audiences to deal with hard realities when they are being entertained."

Indeed they do. There is a steady comedic flow through *Brookline*, complete with clever quips and an element of nostalgia as well. Moreover, the play is semi-autobiographical, minus the traumatic brain injury, as Christner borrows from his own history to round his main character. The social/political

commentary in the play is enhanced by his use of purposefully selected Vietnam-era rock music. This may be serious subject matter but, like any comedy, there is a happy ending. Romance abounds, as this is also a love story, like a play within a play. And that Cormac dude can sing!

Christner also references outside plays/novels and their characters. Gwendolyn Fairfax is a pretentious fictional character in Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She portends with the face of morality. Cormac McIntyre may be a play on Cormac McCarthy, author of *No Country for Old Men*, which plays heavily on the idea that the nature of evil has changed, while old values no longer exist. Ripley Randolph, "friend" of the lead character, likely refers to Randall Ripley, professor in the Political Science department at The Ohio State University and Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, whose many publications on politics, economics and bureaucracy have helped shape congressional policies.

It can be difficult bringing such strong themes to life on stage, but regarding *A Tree Falls in Brookline*, which had to be delayed a year due to COVID-19, Christner is very pleased with what he sees. "I think (Director) Richard has a great cast, and he seems to have a good feel for the humor in the play."



David Christner, Writer of *A Tree Falls in Brookline*

Meet the Director

Richard Griffin is a film director, has been for many years, and is also an actor. Like most artists, he occasionally likes to challenge himself by stretching his wings and trying something new. He proposed to Community Players Board Member Karen Kessler that he'd like to try his hand at directing. Not long after, he received a call from her asking if he'd like to direct a new play, *A Tree Falls in Brookline*. After reading the play, he knew this was something he'd like to take on. He explains, "I've acted for the CP since 2000, steadily for the past five or six years. I sort of threw my hat into the ring to direct. I literally just jumped from a two-month film into this play."

He is incredibly impressed with his cast of 10. "If you cast the play correctly, you've done 80% of the work," he says. "Obviously there was a two-year break for most actors due to the pandemic. Coming back after that, and during the rehearsal practice two weeks ago, they were rehearsing with masks on the entire time. Their face is such a big part of their tool box. This is a real challenge for any actor, and they were just fantastic! It was truly incredible to watch them, and they really embodied these characters so well."

Stage Manager Maxine Wolfson was essential to this production as well. "Maxine and I have worked together now a second time, and she is wonderful at just keeping everything so organized. The importance of keeping the tone in stage very light," he explains. "Nobody has to worry about if everything is in the proper place. She's just amazing at what she does, a good morale boost for everyone. A stage play lives and dies by its stage manager. It's the person who ensures everything runs smoothly. I can't image doing anything without her as my stage manager."

How does someone who usually directs film shift gears to the stage? "This is their 100th season, so everything is run like clockwork. They (Community Players) were able to jump into this very quickly and still be very organized. It really is a family atmosphere. It's community theater, we're all doing it because we love it."

It doesn't hurt that the subject matter strongly appealed to Griffin as well. "The thing that really attracted me to this play is that the characters are at least 50 or older. It was wonderful to do a play about people in that time of their life. It's not about growing older and being regretful about it. These people are still very much alive- vital and energetic. I was really attracted to the subject matter because of the age of the characters. We're a very youth-oriented culture. These actors pulled it off so beautifully. Hope for us all!" Griffen goes on to say, "It's a gentle comedy, not like a slamming-door farce, and I like that." Simple sets, by Grifkos Scenics, help to emphasize the actors' skills and dialogue. The lighting, by Amelia Holton, changes with each mood's highs and lows. Costumes by Pamela Jackson reflect the individuals' profession or current state of mind (and lack thereof!). Much attention is given to the little things, and the larger things go home with you. All this, paired with a strong cast, solid writing and direction, makes *A Tree Falls in Brookline* truly worthy of your time.



Richard Griffen, Director of *A Tree Falls in Brookline*

All shows are performed in the Jenks Auditorium, 350 Division St., Pawtucket, RI. For more information, visit www.thecommunityplayers.org or call (401) 726-6860.

Tickets available at <https://app.arts-people.com/index.php?ticketing=tcpri>