

**A Healing Remembrance: Granite Theatre  
presents Readings from Tower Stories**

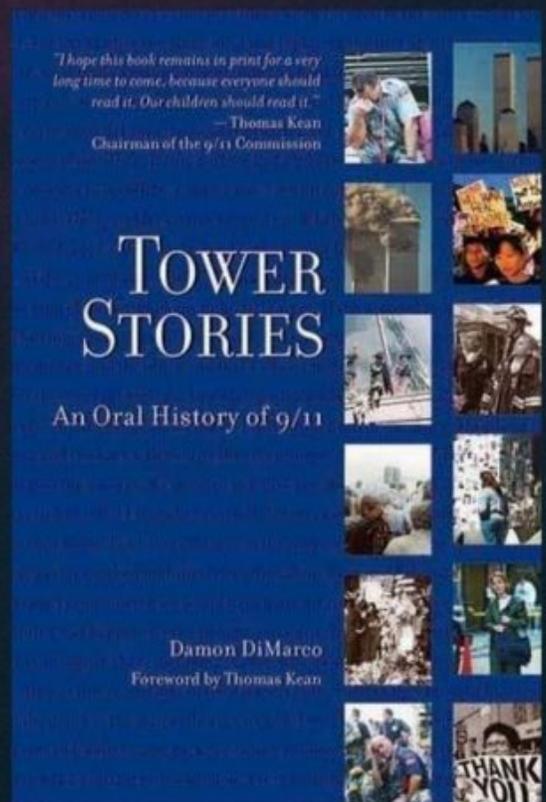
The Granite Theatre presents  
Readings from

# Tower Stories

As collected by Damon DiMarco

Friday, September  
11th at 7pm

A special event to  
remember and reflect  
on the events of 9/11.  
Proceeds from ticket  
sales will be donated  
to 9/11 relief  
organizations.



*On the 19th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, the Granite Theatre in Westerly will be presenting a one-night only virtual event. "Readings from Tower Stories," collected by author Damon DiMarco, chronicles the experiences of six different people who escaped the World Trade Center on that tragic day, and what transpired in the weeks that followed.*

*Motif's Kevin Broccoli spoke with the director, Chelsea Ordner, about the virtual production.*

**Kevin Broccoli (Motif):** How did you first become involved with this project?

**Chelsea Ordner:** I joined the Board of the Granite Theatre in June, and we began our online productions just a month later. When discussing what we might consider doing for our September show, I had suggested doing a 9/11 tribute. People tend to "remember" on big anniversaries, and next year will be 20 years. That shocked me, that it was already 20 years ago. I knew I wanted to do something reverent, and 9/11 as a national trauma really resonated with me in these days of COVID, as we undergo another national trauma. It was up to me to provide my theater with a cost-effective show, and pretty quickly. We don't have the budget for *Come From Away*, or things like that, so I did some research. A friend of mine, Vinny Lupino, suggested I read *Tower Stories* by Damon DiMarco, and as soon as I did, I knew that this was what I was looking for. In the weeks and months following the events of September 11, 2001, Mr. DiMarco interviewed people about what they saw and felt on that day, and those oral histories were compiled all together into his book. It took me a while to read it, honestly. I had to keep putting it down to process what these people had gone through. After reading it, I chose six people (three men and three women) from the book, and I edited their stories together into a series of monologues.

**KB:** Even after all these months, we're still learning to navigate the digital performing arts realm. Did that present any issues as you were putting this piece together?

**CO:** This is my first time directing, and while Zoom has proved a wonderful way to keep us relevant, it did take away some of what I'll call rehearsal magic. I didn't get to see my cast all together in the same room, and really for this play, it's better that way. None of the stories we are sharing on Friday night are by people who know each other. All the same, there's something to be said about the creative, collaborative spirit that erupts when you get a group of passionate, determined people together. The main issue I get crazy about is the sound — I like to have things just so — and there's a level of letting go that has to accompany online productions. You just can't have the same control. Ha! Isn't that a lesson from this year?

**KB:** I was a high school senior on 9/11, and I remember it being the last time that most of us felt compelled to contribute to a sort of collective kindness. With the country being in the midst of a

worldwide crisis and still so divided, do you think looking back on this tragedy might help people remember the moments of compassion?

**CO:** That is one of my primary goals, yes. The timing of this show is important for me, not only to commemorate the events of that day. I was struck by how the collective loss of 9/11 and COVID-19 have had such a different response from the public, and I'm not sure what to attest that to. Is it because it's an election year? Is it because of social media? I could see so much of what we are experiencing emotionally on the pages of *Tower Stories*, and in the words of the people who witnessed two planes fly into the World Trade Center. I'm hoping that seeing the hard truth of how these men and women were affected will make us more likely to acknowledge that we are being affected. I have seen some very ugly things come out of the past year, some things I thought just couldn't be possible. But! There's a natural balance to that, and there have been some outstanding moments of human connection and a societal urge to turn back to a simpler life — Reconnect. Community Theatre has a duty to provide a space for their patrons to have difficult conversations, grow and process complex emotions. I want to show everyone that it's ok to have uncomfortable conversations and talk about the things we don't want to, because that's how we begin to heal. And boy, do we need some healing right now.

**KB:** How did you assemble the talent for this project? Is it easier to be able to pull from a wider geographic area since in-person rehearsing/performing isn't a factor?

**CO:** Yes, I was very lucky in that I got to call on actors I haven't had a chance to work with in a long time, and mix them in with people I have only just started working with. We have actors in this production from Brooklyn, NY, and Portland, OR, as well as here in Rhode Island. I made the conscious choice to cast everyone under the age of 40. There's a generational quality to this show that I think is important, and ties into our understanding of history. I'm a historian by profession, so I'll try to keep this concise. When people stop talking about it, or stop telling stories, historical events just fade into history, and they become inaccessible to us in a way. We can read about them, but we'll never know what it was like for people, it will always be this misty enigma, just out of reach. That's why I believe oral histories are so important, and why I was so keen to use this script in particular. These are real people. So back to my original point, there are people who very clearly remember 9/11, and there are people coming up in this world who may not have even been born yet. It's easy for that younger generation to say, oh that happened to old people, because it was 20 years ago, when really, at the time, those people were young professionals — just like the people I cast in the show. I think it makes it so much more real and accessible to a younger generation. And again, draws the parallel to the essential workers in our current pandemic.

**KB:** What's it like for you working on a production that is this emotionally potent? What about it has resonated most with you?

**CO:** I was very worried about my cast's emotional well-being because this is asking a lot of people who

might not have that much to give, emotionally, right now. I mean, does anyone? It was imperative to me that everyone was comfortable and had the head space to contribute. This is a tough show, and I made it that way on purpose. Memory is an odd thing, and I think re-exposing ourselves to exactly what happened might give us some perspective. There are graphic descriptions of what people saw, and I do not want to ever undermine the catastrophic loss of life that day. I'm hoping that the audience feels something — and whether it's good or bad — they sit with it a while. There are a few lines in the show that give me whole body chills every time I hear them, but my favorite is one that belongs to Nicole: "I was astonished to see what came out of me, and what came out of other people. Especially when we got to the Pit." I find it so heartbreaking and inspirational at the same time. This past year has been so frustrating and confusing. I can't understand where our humanity went, so in a way, this show was also a bit therapeutic for me.

**KB:** Do you feel a heavier sense of responsibility helping create the portrayals of people connected to a real event?

**CO:** Absolutely, but I find that it is a great motivator. I want to be respectful, and give the proper gravity to these events, while still making it something people want to watch. I'm honored that Damon DiMarco, the author of *Tower Stories*, was so encouraging and such a pleasure to work with. He and I have the same goal in mind — sharing these experiences with a wide audience so that people truly never forget what happened on September 11, 2001. *Tower Stories* also shows that everyone copes differently, and they are all valid. Some people are livid, some people are detached, some people are full of sorrow or regret. There is no one right way to handle something like this, so hopefully that resonates with the audience.

**KB:** Next year will be the 20th anniversary of 9/11; is this a project you'd be interested in bringing back?

**CO:** Originally, I had hoped to do something for the 20th anniversary. I've had a lot of people reaching out to me, wanting to talk about their 9/11 experiences, which really blew me away. I didn't expect that from people so long after the fact. Now I'm hoping that next year I can do something similar, but use all local people's stories. I know a number of firefighters from Rhode Island and Connecticut volunteered and went down to help with the relief efforts — others had family members or close friends who worked in the World Trade Center. And this is exactly why I wanted to do this — to start the conversation, and it's already happening.

***Readings from Tower Stories***, collected by author Damon DiMarco, directed by Chelsea Ordner, will be presented on one night only on Friday, September 11 @ 7pm.

**VIEWER DISCRETION ADVISED:** *Some of the content used to portray witness accounts is violent and graphic and is not suitable for children. Use the following link to register and reserve your spot at Eventbrite:*

*A portion of proceeds will go to the FealGood Foundation (FGF), named for first responder John Feal. FGF provides assistance to first responders as well as education regarding the medical plights of 9/11 first responders. For more information, go to [fealgoodfoundation.com](http://fealgoodfoundation.com)*