

Ready to Play: Contemporary Theater Company heads back onstage



Photo of Tammy Brown by Seth Jacobson

Theaters are on the road to reopening with in-person shows scheduled all over the state — many of them outdoors and still taking a limited number of precautions. The most ambitious seasonal programming so far is the Contemporary Theater Company's summer line-up in Wakefield. The theater has an updated patio space and a new artistic director, **Tammy Brown**, as it looks ahead to the next few months.

Motif contributor **Kevin Broccoli** spoke with Brown about what audiences can expect to see when shows start up over Memorial Day Weekend.

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): How does it feel to finally be looking at in-person programming on the horizon?

Tammy Brown: It feels like we're on the road to getting back to normal, thank goodness! It's great to be getting back to that in-person experience that we've all missed so dearly, but it can be daunting, too. We're trying to ease back into the grind without overwhelming ourselves too quickly. And we're also re-learning how to socially interact and how to be in rehearsals and act and direct in-person again. It's an adventure!

KB: CTC has been undergoing some incredible growth, particularly in the patio area. How is this going to affect the summer season?

TB: Eventually it will be great because we're adding a whole new seating section and a new bar area as well. But for this summer, it will definitely look like we're under construction. All of our shows are out on the patio, so audiences will get to see our construction project first hand, in real time! But most of the former seating area of the patio is still intact, so it shouldn't actually be a hindrance to shows.

KB: When the time came to choose titles for the next few months, what was first on your mind?

TB: I wanted our first few projects back to emphasize reinvention. Many of us made promises to not just go back to the same way we used to do things. I think theater constantly needs to evolve, so it always feels like the art form of the moment and not some historic relic. To that end, we have a lot of new work happening at the beginning of the summer — A new Shakespeare Mash-up show called *Dearer The Eyesight*, and a devised theater piece called *Fools of Another Nature*. The second half of the summer focuses on shows that feel like they belong outside, *Bethel Park Falls* and *Native Gardens*, so it will feel very much like a site-specific theater experience.

KB: How involved are you in the upcoming productions as the new artistic director?

TB: The early part of our summer season is centered on new work, so I've been pretty involved in the development process of those shows. I'm also directing *Dearer Than Eyesight* and *Native Gardens*.

KB: How important was it to you to keep the outdoor space active as we all begin to reopen?

TB: We see the patio space as a community gathering point, so it's always been important for us to keep that space full of life. I think the fact that we have the patio space alone is what makes having an outdoor season possible this year, so we're grateful for that, too. And the patio is a great place to stage things because we get a lot of curious passers-by, so it sparks their interest and hopefully entices them to come down and watch a show.

KB: Can you tell me what the experience will be like for the audience in terms of keeping certain restrictions in place?

TB: Guidance and guidelines are constantly evolving, so we're definitely staying on top of that. For right now, the plan is to ask that members of the audience wear masks when moving about the space, but they can take them off when they're seated. We plan on setting up the chairs with 3 feet of distance between them to start, but that could evolve over the course of the summer as more folks are vaccinated and people's comfort levels change over time. We're also mandating that all of our staff and volunteers be fully vaccinated by July 1, so our performers will be acting without masks.

KB: Later this year, you're going to be presenting *The Tempest*. When looking at a classical piece to produce, what attracted you to this one?

TB: The things I was thinking about most were tone and familiarity. I wanted something that felt broad in scope, with a certain amount of gravity, but also something had some lightness to it and was ultimately hopeful. *The Tempest* fits those criteria nicely. And picking a show that has some familiarity to it will hopefully entice people to come watch theater indoors again.

KB: *Bethel Park Falls* was a show I was unfamiliar with until I heard you were producing it. Can you talk a little more about that production?

TB: This is a pretty new play that was written by Jason Pizzarello in 2018. It's made up of several sweet vignettes that talk about what happens when a beloved city park gets taken over by developers. I like how the play talks about the importance of public space to a community. Also, knowing that our season would be entirely outdoors, I loved the idea of staging a play that takes place in a park.

KB: CTC has had a lot of luck taking titles like *The Father* and *Skriker* that are typically produced indoors and bringing them outside. I'm especially excited to see how *Native Gardens* plays in an outdoor setting. Is that something you thought about as you were looking at titles?

TB: That's definitely something I was thinking about. We had actually planned to stage *Native Gardens* outdoors in the summer of 2020. Staging a show about gardens in a real garden seemed really fun.

KB: What's the response been like from the community now that you've announced you're returning? I know how much the theater means to Wakefield and South County. Has it given you an extra boost seeing all the enthusiasm for you all to return in full force?

TB: YES! We're really grateful that our local community has been *so* supportive of us during the closure. There's been a lot of excitement about both our reopening and our expansion. It's a wonderful feeling to be able to welcome people back and signal that we're gonna be ok, and things are slowly going back to normal.

For more information about the Contemporary Theater Company's summer season, including musical events like the Wakefield Idol Concert, go to contemporarytheatercompany.com