

# The Prince of Providence: Rebecca Gibel discusses playing the woman behind the man

Everybody (in Rhode Island) of a certain age has a Buddy Cianci story. For me, Buddy threw out the first pitch at my Little League Opening Day games and posed for a pic with us when we won the championship in 1982. I have clear memories of scrawling “Cianci Sucks” in the wet cement that appeared after his administration gutted the trees on my street and did some seemingly unneeded curb repairs (even when he was cleaning up Providence, we still loved to hate him). Plunderdome, fireplace logs, toupees and marinara...all of these became catchwords and clichés when discussing the on again/off again felon of a mayor Providence endured for what seemed forever. It was only a matter of time before his legend became novelized and now, besides the talk of a film treatment, we have a stage adaptation of Mike Stanton’s book, *The Prince of Providence*. Brown/Trinity MFA graduate Taibi Magar directs George Brant’s (*Grounded*) treatment on Trinity’s Dowling stage September 12 - October 27.



photo credit: David Noles

Is Cianci proper dramatic fodder, or are we just cashing in on some tarnished nostalgia? Perhaps a bit of both, given the popularity of the subject in the *Crimetown* podcast. Portraying the man himself is not one of Trinity’s own, but a ringer, Scott Aiello, best known for his four episodes of Showtime’s *Billions*. What is passed over in most of the press surrounding this production, however, is the portrayal of

Cianci's long-suffering ex-wife, Sheila, who was married to Buddy right up until things started to get ... interesting ... for our titular Prince. She went on to marry former state rep and attorney Keven A. McKenna, who would be a key factor in a 1984 recall drive against Cianci. Her life has been part *Goodfellas* part *Alice in Wonderland*, and she is no less interesting a character than the former mayor. Portraying Sheila is Trinity's own Rebecca Gibel, who was kind enough to answer a few questions from *Motif* on her preparation for the role and what it's like to portray not only a living character, but someone who may very well be in attendance at the show.

**Terry Shea (Motif):** What have you found to be the most interesting and/or surprising thing you've learned about Buddy Cianci through your time spent with the actual Sheila Cianci?

**Rebecca Gibel:** Spending time with and getting to know Sheila Bentley (formerly Cianci) has been one of my favorite parts of taking on this role. She is smart, quick-witted...she has surgeon-like precision with a punchline...and a delight to be around. Our conversations have ranged over many topics beyond her years with Buddy. I admire the strong relationships she's forged with her family and friends. She's a resilient survivor with a strong dose of optimism. In terms of what I learned about Buddy, I was surprised by the amount of control he sought to wield within their marriage. I don't want to violate Sheila's trust by revealing the specifics of our conversations. I realized through talking with Sheila that I had allowed myself to make some of the more disturbing stories about Buddy almost kitschy or funny in my mind. Speaking with Sheila helped me connect with how truly intimidating he must have been at times in their relationship, and what an iron will it must have taken to survive those years.

**TS:** You're portraying a person not only still alive but known by many of the people who will be seeing the play. Does that carry any extra pressure?

**RG:** I feel incredible pressure portraying Sheila! I've never played a role based on a person who will actually be IN THE AUDIENCE! As with any play based on real events, some things get edited out, some combined or hybridized, some smoothed to make the narrative arc more complete. George Brant has done a truly masterful job of covering decades of time in the span of an evening, and keeping the play focused on the complexities surrounding Buddy's legacy, and the questions he'd like the audience to ponder long after their night at the theater. Within that, I feel an inevitable tension between what I've learned about Sheila's experience during that time, and what is ultimately on the page of the script, since no piece of art can contain every complex perspective within a human relationship. Ultimately, I hope I can imbue the nuances and kernels of Sheila's experience into my portrayal of her in a way that feels true and epic, both of which are words I'd use to describe not only Sheila's personality, but George's play, and Taibi Magar's direction.

**TS:** Have you heard any opposition to Trinity producing this piece?

**RG:** EVERYBODY I've talked to has a strong opinion about Buddy, a personal story about him, and thoughts and questions about the play. I find that thrilling!

*Trinity Rep presents the world premiere of The Prince of Providence, by George Brant, based on the book The Prince of Providence by Mike Stanton, Directed by Taibi Magar. Sarah and Joseph Dowling, Jr. Theater, 201 Washington St, Providence. Ticket lottery info (winners pay \$49/ticket) can be found at: [trinityrep.com/the-prince-of-providence-lottery/](http://trinityrep.com/the-prince-of-providence-lottery/) . For ticket purchase and other info, visit [trinityrep.com/show/the-prince-of-providence/](http://trinityrep.com/show/the-prince-of-providence/) or call 401-351-4242.*