

NEW ENGLAND THEATRE IN REVIEW

MARTHA SCHMOYER LOMONACO, *Editor*

Theatre During a Pandemic, Volume Two

The COVID-19 pandemic that shuttered theatres worldwide in March 2020 continued to plague our industry through the summer of 2021, inhibiting all performing arts organizations from returning to any semblance of normal. The exigencies of the pandemic, coupled with the equally urgent need to reform theatre structure and practice along anti-racist lines, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion both on and off stage, became the twin foci for theatres across America in 2020-21.

I am thrilled to report that all eleven New England regional theatres covered in *NETJ* have survived and have responded to the current crises with ingenuity and industry. All have kept loyal audiences engaged in myriad activities throughout the 2020-21 season and contributing much-needed funds to depleted coffers, while theatre administrators have critically examined and begun transforming their operating policies and procedures. “Business as usual” will not return to our stages, even after the health crisis has passed and the demands of Black Lives Matter and the “We See You White American Theatre” movements, propelled in June 2020 by the murder of George Floyd and a universal cry for racial equality in our theatres, no longer garner headlines. Our indefatigable reviewers present the stories of these remarkable, resilient theatres in the ensuing pages.

Theatres seized the COVID moment of enforced closure to reflect on who they are, what they do, and how they operate. To help readers navigate new terminologies and acronyms that have become commonly used this past year, I am providing some definitions and explanations here. These should assist you when reading our writers’ shorthand commentaries in their reviews and will prove useful to people reading these pages in the future.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for racial equality and against white supremacy, founded in 2013, was reinvigorated by the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, instigating worldwide protests of the continuing oppression of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and

People of Color) individuals by governments, institutions, and vigilantes. All of this had a profound effect on American theatre as BIPOC artists gathered virtually to put their long-held grievances against the white theatre establishment in writing. On 8 June 2020 over 300 theatre makers signed a virtual letter, “Dear White American Theatre,” calling out the rampant racism in the theatre industry; soon thereafter the website, “We See You White American Theatre” (WSYWAT:www.weseeyouwat.com) emerged with detailed principles, tenets, and demands for change. Not-for-profit professional, university, and community theatres across the U.S., and many throughout the world, responded in various ways: affirming solidarity through published statements; conducting internal investigations of their own histories, practices, and procedures and effecting change, as required; consciously hiring BIPOC theatre artists to administrative and artistic staffs; programming plays written by BIPOC playwrights; and reaching out more energetically to engage BIPOC members of their communities as audiences and active participants in decision-making. Theatres created, or enhanced already established DEI programs (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) governing all aspects of their work, from hiring to audience development. Many of these proclamations and activities are documented on the WSYWAT website.

Another theatre practice under scrutiny is the demanding and often dangerously unhealthy production schedule maintained by many companies, particularly during technical rehearsals, and its deleterious effects on the physical and mental well-being of the workers. Yale Rep, which began to reform its schedules pre-COVID, identifies its awakened focus on self-care to be “an antidote to the exhaustion that many people regard as a field-wide norm and manifestation of a culture of white supremacy.” Hence, Yale, along with other New England theatres, are eliminating the old “10 out of 12” rule for technical rehearsals which meant that in a twelve-hour extended workday, everyone would have at least two hours off. This rule had long been mandated for members of Actors’ Equity, the professional union for actors and stage managers in live production, but it was rare that technical staff, which frequently suffered an even more grueling “12 out of 14” workday, adhered to it and clearly, both situations were untenable. As theatres emerge from COVID, there is widespread agreement that this practice should be eliminated and there is a movement afoot to do so (<https://nomore10out->

of12s.com). This and other changes—Yale has cut back to a five-day work week prior to technical rehearsals—will help alleviate the burnout frequently suffered by theatre professionals.

The history of the COVID-19 era of theatre production is a history of how New England theatres abandoned “business as usual” and responded in their own way. Although *NETIR* is maintaining the usual structure of its reviews by listing the company name and productions at the top, there is wide variance in what is being reported in this issue: from “no productions”; to theatres offering exclusively virtual events, which may or may not include actual shows; to those that succeeded in producing both live and online performances and events. Portland Stage, under a special agreement with Actors’ Equity, managed to produce a full live, on-stage season, which it also recorded and livestreamed for audiences who chose not to attend in person. Barrington Stage garnered national headlines last summer for its innovative attempts to severely reduce and socially-distance audiences through a massive rebuilding of its theatre to ensure safe indoor productions, a plan initially embraced by Actors’ Equity and the state of Massachusetts but ultimately kiboshed; instead, it was one of the first theatres in the country to offer outdoor shows under extraordinary circumstances (see Steven Otfinoski’s fascinating review for details). Long Wharf Theatre scheduled an outdoor production of *A Little Bit of Death* in a New Haven public park that ultimately had to be re-tooled for an online showing when Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont announced new limitations for safe outdoor gatherings in November. The Huntington restaged its popular 2018 production of Eleanor Burgess’s *The Niceties* for the virtual stage, bringing back the show’s original cast to reprise their performances. Other theatres created special programs, held annual fundraising galas, and offered educational events (online classes, lectures, discussions, symposia) which they broadcast via Zoom, YouTube, and other online platforms, to keep audiences engaged and contributing money to ensure that theatres would be back for the 2021-22 season — and they are. Long Wharf Theatre had especially vigorous programming, signifying its newfound mission towards embracing the largely BIPOC population of New Haven and building a new audience in anticipation of its return to live performances; Karl G. Ruling demonstrates the theatre’s commitment with the long list of offerings he provides at the top of his review.

I would be remiss in not mentioning two other New England theatres, not usually reviewed by us, for their notable COVID-era stories. The first, New Repertory Theatre (New Rep) in Watertown, Massachusetts, a professional theatre dedicated to political and social awareness since its founding in 1984, announced in July 2021 that it is suspending operations until further notice. Fiscal challenges and “COVID-related uncertainty regarding mounting in-person productions in the near future” propelled the board’s unfortunate decision. On a happier note, the Berkshire Theatre Group, based in Lenox, Massachusetts, succeeded in safely mounting an outdoor, in-person production of *Godspell* in August 2020 during the height of the pandemic. Audiences were masked and socially distanced while actors performed in protective, plexiglass barriers that inhibited physical contact. The production, originally scheduled for the 755-seat Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was moved to a tent with a maximum capacity of one hundred, which included the cast and tech crew, in the adjacent parking lot. Michael Paulson, a *New York Times* theatre reporter, provided well-illustrated documentation of the show, which was a fascinating albeit one-of-a-kind COVID-era theatre production: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/theater/godspell-berkshires-coronavirus.html>

I want to thank our reviewers—Jarrod DePrado, Megan Grumbling, Christopher Hoyt, Stephen Kuehler, David Ledoux, Jan Mason, Steven Otfinoski, Karl G. Ruling, and Angela Sweigart-Gallagher—for so assiduously documenting the journeys, often fraught and always complex, of their theatres in these most turbulent of times. Special thanks to Jarrod DePrado, who has ably trekked to Boston from Connecticut for the past eight years to cover the Huntington’s seasons. Taking over for Jarrod is Paul E. Fallon, who will have a less daunting commute since he is based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just across the Charles River from the Huntington. Welcome, Paul, and welcome to all our readers, new and returning. As always, if you have comments, questions, or a recommendation for other New England theatres that we ought to review, please get in touch with me: mmonaco@fairfield.edu.



AMERICAN REPERTORY THEATER

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, 2020-21

Jack and the Beanstalk: A Musical Adventure Julia Riew (27 Nov. – 4 Jan.), online streaming performance.

This Is Who I Am Amir Nizar Zuabi (29 Nov. – 27 Dec., 13 - 25 Apr.), online streaming performance.

The Conjurors' Club Vinny DePonto and Geoff Kanick (12 Mar. – 10 Apr., 28 Apr. – 16 May), online streaming performance.

After the COVID-19 pandemic truncated its season in spring 2020, the American Repertory Theater energetically filled the programming vacuum with online events such as webinars, scholarly discussions, and interviews with theatre practitioners. The company held out the hope of a normal, in-person season beginning in the fall. But as the pandemic surged throughout the summer, and the A.R.T.'s sponsoring institution, Harvard University, announced that its fall semester would be entirely online, the Theater also accepted the virtual turn as unavoidable, and produced a busy season of video talks and performances. These included a monthly series of conversations with theater-makers called "Behind the Scenes"; "The Lunch Room," a weekly virtual talk show with artists and civic activists; and "Civically Speaking," an array of discussions, lectures, and performance events on history, politics, and justice. On 29 October, the public was invited to watch and comment as Artistic Director Diane Paulus talked via Zoom with Professor Joseph Allen, of Harvard's T. H. Chan School of Public Health, about the "Roadmap for Recovery and Resilience for Theater" that Allen had helped the A.R.T. craft after the pandemic struck.

Theatrical presentations were also given virtually, starting with a children's musical version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (continuing the A.R.T.'s tradition of shows catering to children and their families during the winter holidays). *This Is What I Am*, a new play co-produced by the A.R.T. with four other theatre companies, was notable for integrating the online format into the very substance of the work, in which a Palestinian father and son, separated by geography and years of estrangement, reunite on a video call as each prepares the same traditional pastry in his own kitchen. The play received appreciative notices in the Boston press, and it returned in the spring as a streaming video available on demand. A third virtual production, *The Conjurors' Club*, brought together eleven magicians for an eighty-minute

show of illusions, sleight of hand, and mind-reading. Each performance featured four conjurors, who encouraged audience members to participate using objects from a “secret package” they received before the show. The initial extended run of twenty-seven performances proved so popular that eighteen more were added.

Beyond the bustle of online programming, the A.R.T. leaders and staff were reconsidering the company’s mission in light of the public health concerns raised by the pandemic and the intense outcry against systemic racism provoked by the murders of George Floyd and others. The company expanded its mission statement to address these realities: “We commit to advancing public health in our practice and our programming, recognizing that racism in America is a national public health crisis . . . We affirm and celebrate a multitude of perspectives and experiences that reflect the diversity of our country and world. We are dedicated to making a welcoming and accessible space for people of any identity, background, or ability. . . We acknowledge that as an institution we must center anti-racism [and] habituate anti-racist practices in our policies, structure and culture.”

This focus on anti-racism absorbed and directed the A.R.T.’s energies significantly during the 2020-21 season. The Theater engaged in a complex process of institutional self-examination, documented by periodic reports on its website, which identified “steps to build anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices into [its] structure, culture, and governance” as part of a journey that would be “sustained, ongoing, and foundational.” Just *how* foundational the changes might be were indicated by a personal statement from Diane Paulus herself, posted to the website on 4 June 2020. Three days earlier, the Black writer and actor Griffin Matthews had released a video on social media, in which he excoriated Ms. Paulus (without naming her) for the racist treatment he claimed he had received from her: first in 2014, when his musical *Witness Uganda* was produced at the A.R.T., and again in 2015, when the show was further developed and directed by Paulus, with significant changes including a new title, *Invisible Thread*, for production at New York’s Second Stage. In her statement, Paulus was contrite:

“I am profoundly sorry for the pain I caused Griffin and any other person involved in our process. I am learning . . . We live in a racist world, and no one is immune to it, myself included. To transform this world, we need first to acknowledge the role we play in it. This letter is part of that process. I also realize this process is not happening fast enough. Our entire industry, espe-



Vinny DePonto and Geoff Kanick in *The Conjurers' Club*. PHOTO: ELIZABETH DEBLASI

cially those in positions of power, needs to examine our practices and make changes, including at my own institution, the A.R.T. Accountability is paramount, for myself and for all of us in our field.”

One year after that statement, the A.R.T. issued a press release that confidently announced a full season of in-person shows beginning in August

2021, all of them featuring music and dance. Two of the productions, both holdovers from the COVID-19 cancellations of 2020, will reflect the Theater's new determination to assert that people of color, and people of diverse identities, do matter: in *Macbeth in Stride*, actress and singer Whitney White will reinterpret Lady Macbeth as an embodiment of Black women's ambition; and in a revival of the musical *1776*, a multiracial cast of actors who identify themselves as female, transgender, queer, or non-binary will represent the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Tap-dance artist Ayodele Casel will perform her new work *Chasing Magic*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* will return during the holidays, this time live on stage. The Silkroad Ensemble and its director Rhiannon Giddens will make a three-night stop at the Cambridge main stage with their post-pandemic call for justice and peace, *Phoenix Rising*. Three other productions will focus on another value from the A.R.T.'s expanded mission statement, to "promote the health and vitality of our planet." For this writer and many others, after eighteen months of idled stages, the opportunity to attend live theatrical performances again will go a long way toward restoring health, vitality, and well-being.

STEPHEN KUEHLER
Harvard University

BARRINGTON STAGE
PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, 2020

Harry Clarke David Cale (live production 5-16 Aug.)

The Hills are Alive with Rodgers and Hammerstein Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein (live production 19 - 29 Aug.)

10 x10 New Play Festival Various authors (11-21 March 2021, streaming)

It was nearing show time on a surprisingly cool August night. By this time in the summer season, this reviewer would have seen close to a dozen shows in the Berkshires. But not this year. COVID had closed every theater in the region, with two exceptions—Berkshire Theatre Festival and the Barrington Stage Company (BSC), whose first production of the season I was about to see. The play, *Harry Clarke*, was supposed to be staged in the Boyd-Quinson Main Stage. Artistic Director Julianne Boyd had decided, in the words of a New York Times writer, to "become a pandemic pioneer." She had removed hundreds of seats to provide for social distancing, redesigned the bathrooms



Harry (Mark H. Dold) reflects on his life of crime in *Harry Clarke* PHOTO: DANIEL RADER.

and even altered the way patrons would enter and exit the theater. Actors Equity had approved the production based on these changes, but at the last minute the state of Massachusetts refused to let the production go on. Undaunted, Boyd had a tent erected in the parking lot of the Polish Community Club, just a block away from BSC's St. Germain Stage, and put on the play outdoors.

So here I was, seeing one of the first plays to open in the Berkshires this summer. As I approached the tent, fully masked, I was greeted by a friendly usher who verified my presence on a guest list and took my temperature with a head thermometer. Then another usher escorted me to my seat – a folding chair. The chairs were set up in groups of one, twos, threes, and fours to accommodate groups of theatergoers with at least six feet between each grouping. A small stage was erected about a dozen feet from where I sat. An usher let me scan an app with my cell phone for a paperless program. A few moments later she returned with the required waiver. It stated that I understood that despite all safety measures taken “that you are entering the theatre at your own risk” and waive all liability “if you should contract the virus.” I wasn't asked to sign the waiver; my verbal approval was enough. As show

time neared, Ms. Boyd took to the stage and confessed that putting on two shows (the other being an outdoor musical revue that would open at the same venue on August 19) had been more difficult than mounting twelve shows in the regular season. She stressed BSC's "commitment to live theatre" and left the stage to enthusiastic applause. Then the show began.

Harry Clarke, a one-man play, is a tour de force for the right actor, and Mark H. Dold clearly filled the bill. Dold has a way with con men, having memorably played the cunning husband in BSC's production of *Gaslight* a few seasons back. Harry is a more appealing villain in David Cale's character study, and Dold explores his dark corners with humor and empathy, unmasked and with only social distancing separating him from the audience. An opening scene from the protagonist's childhood, captured on a family home movie, told us all we needed to know about a dysfunctional father and why his downtrodden son eagerly took on an alter ego, a refined Englishman. Dold struck a delicate balance between Harry's fear of exposure of his dangerous con game on the vulnerable scion of a wealthy family and his growing obsession with the con. In short order, Harry goes on to not only seduce the young man, but eventually his widowed mother and songwriter/singer sister, all three of whom Dold portrayed adeptly with lightning speed. Unlike the venal husband of *Gaslight*, Harry Clarke gets away with his crimes and ends the play where he began it, sunning on a beach in the Seychelles, finely conjured up by a minimalist set and David Lander's nuanced lighting. This quirky solo show about a loner with an uncertain identity was the perfect fit for the lockdown age of Corona.

The only other live production, *The Hills are Alive with Rodgers and Hammerstein*, was a fast-paced seventy-one-minute revue, conceived and directed by Boyd with lively choreography by Shea Sullivan. The five-person, multi-ethnic cast of three women and two men delivered both well-known and less familiar songs from the R & H songbook, ably backed by a four-piece orchestra conducted by Darren R. Cohen.

The 10 x 10 New Play Festival has been a much-anticipated annual winter event at BSC. But due to the pandemic, a live stage production was cancelled. Instead, the show was filmed without an audience by Cody Williams on the Boyd-Quinson Mainstage and then streamed for two weeks in March 2021. The plays were performed on a unit set that Joseph F. Martin patterned after Brian Prather's set for BSC's 2019 production of *Time Flies and Other*

Comedies. Scott Pinkney provided the lighting and Boyd and Matthew Penn divided the directorial duties.

Six versatile actors went through their paces in a mixed bag of ten short plays. Some were all too predictable two-character exercises like *People Will Talk*, an extended conversation between two suicidal ledge jumpers and *Finding Help*, where a stressed daughter and a no-nonsense home care worker convince a cranky mother he is the better alternative than her moving into a private care facility. Other entries were clever misfires. In *Protecting the Innocent* a father goes to extreme lengths to keep his daughter from coming downstairs before the gifts are set out on Christmas Eve, but the situation and the humor seemed labored.

The most promising pieces took comedy to the edge with more imaginative leaps. In *Lizzie Borden Gets Engaged*, the homicidal lady interviews three understandably nervous and unwilling suitors—the proverbial butcher, baker, and candlestick maker. Keir Safron made a gruesomely seductive Lizzie, whose real agenda became clear only at play's end. In *Happy Birthday Leonard* a wife, a very funny Peggy Pharr Wilson, paid a hooker, ably played by Maya Loren Jackson, to be her husband's 70th birthday present. Love took a more surprising turn in *Don't Call Me Cupid* where the aging god of love, an amusing Robert Zukerman, mistook his hunting arrow for the loving kind, and shot a lover dead in front of his beloved. In Alex Dremann's witty *Speed Play* two strangers compete on a park bench as they imagine the lives of the passersby and finally turn their attention to each other. Perhaps the most impressive play, and certainly the most compelling, was *Blind Larks* by Christine Foster where four teachers are caught in a rock fall and evaluate their chances of survival.

Barrington Stage met the challenges of a most challenging season with bold ingenuity. "The show must go on," Boyd told the New York Times back in July 2020: "we're happy we took the in-depth measures we did, and as soon as the governor takes the next step, we're ready to go back." And with their 2021 season off to a flying start with a full slate of productions scheduled both outdoors and on the reconfigured Boyd-Quinson Mainstage, there's no question that BSC is back to stay.

STEVEN OTFINOSKI
Fairfield University

THE SANDRA FEINSTEIN-GAMM THEATRE (THE GAMM)

WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND, 2020-21

No productions

When last we met, the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre (The Gamm) had just celebrated its 35th season. A strongly acted production of Lucas Hnath's, *A Doll's House, Part 2*, a thought-provoking production of Aaron Posner's *JQA*, a festive holiday treat in *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry, and Joshua Harmon's *Admissions* were the last we saw of normalcy for over a year. The Gamm's first Broadway musical, *Assassins*, was interrupted just a week into its run by COVID-19, and then Amy Herzog's *Mary Jane* was cancelled indefinitely. The cancelled productions and the Gamm's newly announced 2020-21 season were put on hold with hopes to produce them at a later time, but ultimately, the doors would remain closed to live audiences for the entire year, with the theatre producing only free online content. With plans for an exciting 37th season, we hopefully will be back in the theatre's relatively new home this fall to see live theatre once again, without a screen and a WIFI connection getting in our way.

The centerpiece of The Gamm's programming was an online series called *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*. In the series Artistic Director Tony Estrella discussed many topics related to acting, interpreting, and analyzing Shakespeare's text with invited guests. One notable episode featured Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, founder of Mixed Magic Theatre (Pawtucket, RI). The episode, recorded on the Mixed Magic stage, featured Estrella and Pitts-Wiley discussing everything from Shakespeare to American history and current events. Pitts-Wiley demonstrated impressive insights into theatre's place in the eternal human struggle of power, racism, and oppression. This and other episodes can be found on the Gamm's YouTube channel.

Except for *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*, and some public health videos partnered with the Rhode Island Department of Health, the only other offering was a sneak preview of next season's opener with a free online staged reading of, *A Lie Agreed Upon* by Tony Estrella, billed as "a new version of Henrik Ibsen's, *An Enemy of the People*." The Gamm website also lists a live comedic musical revue that takes place in the theatre's lobby called *Jamm at the Gamm*. The information has not been updated since the summer of 2020, but



IMAGE DESIGNED BY JON DEL SESTO, MANAGER OF DESIGN AND MEDIA.

Managing Director Amy Gravell said, “*Jamm at The Gamm* has not been active since we closed to the public in March of 2020, but we do expect it to come back!”

The Gamm’s inability to produce theatre gave the education department an opportunity to take a front seat and prove to be one of the Gamm’s only sources of revenue for the year. An important aspect of the education department’s work happens through in-school and after-school arts integration programming. By staying flexible and quickly developing an online curriculum, the department was “able to expand [its] offerings and reach nearly the same number of classrooms [it] would have pre-pandemic,” according to an email exchange with Education Director, Susie Schutt. In reference to the adult studio classes that the Gamm normally offers, Schutt said, “We tentatively offered some online acting classes and were overwhelmed by the positive feedback, so we offered more studio classes than ever before, attracting students all over the country and beyond.” Looking forward, Schutt is excited to put her newly completed drama therapy master’s degree to good use, by creating classes that can help students explore social emotional learning. Some small, skill-based summer camps and classes happened in-person, but mostly the work lived online. A series of education department videos can also be found on the Gamm’s YouTube channel.

As with all theatres in this time, finances have been tight. The Gamm hosted an online gala titled *The Bard’s Bash*, the theatre’s sole public fundraising event which occurred in the spring of 2021. The gala, an ongoing

individual donor campaign throughout the year, Navigant Credit Union's financial support of *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*, and the education department's classes and camps were the entirety of the Gamm's income for the year. Consequently, the theatre is operating with a trimmed down staff, but there are plans for some to return. Managing Director Gravell said, "we are beyond grateful for the tremendous support we have received over the last fifteen months."

The Gamm also took the last year to reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement and do some soul searching about how to be a better ally to people of color. The Gamm put a statement, "Solidarity in Action" on its website: "To our BIPOC friends, artists, students, and community members, we see you and we stand with you in solidarity and support." The statement was accompanied by a letter from Estrella and Gravell, in which they detail how the institution is planning to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion via, among other initiatives, a new fellowship program "designed to provide access and opportunity to emerging artists of color. The Gamm will welcome three Gamm Fellows in its pilot year; one graduate from each [of the state's public colleges and universities,] to participate in an immersive experience aimed at establishing long-standing, meaningful relationships between early career theatre artists and a professional theatre."

And now, we look forward, cautiously optimistic, into season thirty-seven. First up in fall 2021, *A Lie Agreed Upon*, by Tony Estrella. Following that is the Gamm's traditional holiday production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play*, by Joe Landry. Heading into 2022 is *An Octoroon* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, *Ironbound* by Martyna Majok, and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Perhaps at the end of next season, in the final moments of *Midsummer*, we will be able to take up Puck's invocation that we think of everything we have seen as "no more yielding but a dream". Either dream or nightmare, let's hope it soon fades into the past.

DAVID LEDOUX
Bristol Community College

HARTFORD STAGE

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, 2020-21

Scene and Heard: LIVE! Zoom conversations with Artistic Director Melia Bensussen and guests

A Community Carol (17-21 Dec.) Adapted in the spirit of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* by Rachel Alderman. Livestreamed Dec. 17, on-demand through Dec 21.

Inaugural American Voices New Play Festival (23-26 Jun.) *Ash Tree* by Georgina Escobar, *Her Math Play* by Christina Pumariega, and *Simona's Search* by Martín Zimmerman. Livestreamed.

Artistic Director Melia Bensussen and Managing Director Cynthia Rider had their first season at the helm of Hartford Stage cut short by the global pandemic that shuttered theatres across the country 12 March 2020. They cancelled the remaining productions of the 2019-20 season although the theatre presented an online reading of *The King's Speech* by David Seidler, directed by Michael Wilson, and reviewed in *NETIR* 2020. They also reduced their employee workforce from a pre-pandemic level of 200 down to twenty-one, and both Bensussen and Rider took salary reductions.

Through the spring of 2020, Bensussen and Rider presented *Scene and Heard*, a live Zoom series, which began with weekly installments that became monthly episodes as the pandemic wore on. These virtual events included conversations with guest artists and dramatic readings of scenes from a variety of plays.

Hartford Stage had hoped to open a six-play season in January of 2021, but in July of 2020, the theatre announced that it would cancel all performances through June 2021 due to public safety concerns. "Having to cancel our productions has created a serious financial hardship for the theatre," Rider remarked. "Canceling our 2020-21 season as well is a painful but necessary decision to ensure the safety of our audiences and staff and the long-term survival of Hartford Stage."

With the production activities of the theatre shuttered, Hartford Stage launched a robust online education program in the summer of 2020 that included classes for youth and adult students. Classes served seventy-five students during the summer months, and the fall line-up included seven youth classes and five adult classes. It also expanded its scholarship program to provide free classes to Hartford youth.

To regain lost revenue and ensure the theatre could reopen in the fall of 2021, the theatre held its annual gala virtually and launched a *Raise the*



Melia Bensussen and Cynthia Rider.
PHOTO: HARTFORD STAGE ARCHIVE.

Curtain fundraising campaign. Patrons and corporate partners were encouraged to donate funds as well as any outstanding tickets back to the theatre. Those who donated tickets were offered two exclusive virtual events: *The Not-So-Complete History of Comedy*, an evening of stories and material from the cancelled production of *A Complete History of Comedy (Abridged)*, and *A Broadway Evening* hosted by Bensussen, Adam Heller, and Beth Leavel. Plans also were announced for a New Works Festival in November 2020 (which was not produced until June of 2021), and *A Community Carol*, a collaborative performance created in the spirit of *A Christmas Carol*.

A Community Carol, adapted and directed by Artistic Producer Rachel Alderman, was billed as “a beacon of light at the end of a very dark and difficult 2020.” More than eighty collaborators participated in this project (presented live December 17th and available on-demand through December 21st). Contributors included returning *Christmas Carol* cast and Youth Ensemble members; members of *Breakdancing Shakespeare* (an ambitious summer youth program co-sponsored by the Greater Hartford Arts Council); students from Capital Community College and The Hartt School at the University of Hartford; the Hartford Gay Men’s Chorus; religious leaders; and a cohort of local artists. Bensussen noted, “This production . . . emphasizes the three aspects of our work that most matter to us: art, community and education.” The creative team included Video Designer Rasean Davonte Johnson, Sound Designer Pornchanok Kanchanabanca, Assistant Director Zoë Golub-Sass, Dramaturg Sally Lobel, Videographer Alonzo L. Beckett of NE Video and Audio/Visual Coordinator Lucas Clopton.

The inaugural *American Voices New Play Festival* was launched virtually in

June with three new plays by writers with Latinx and Hispanic roots: *Ash Tree* by Georgina Escobar, *Her Math Play* by Christina Pumariega, and *Simona's Search* by Martín Zimmerman. Each play received a four-day workshop in preparation for live public readings presented in virtual broadcasts free-of-charge (with suggested donation) to ticketholders. The theatre clearly selected programming designed to serve Hartford's large Hispanic and Latinx communities which, according to a 2019 census.gov report, account for forty percent of the population. Launching an annual new play festival is an ambitious project and launching one during a pandemic reflects the theatre's strong commitment to nurturing playwrights, practicing anti-racism, and expanding audiences. A statement on the website reads, in part, "We have been called to action by our BIPOC colleagues in the national theatre scene and in our local community. We see you. We hear you. And we see ourselves: a predominantly white institution in a city with a population that is majority Black and Latinx. We are currently working on changes to our organization's culture, policies and practices that address these inequities and racial disparities."

In January of 2021, a coalition of donors issued a \$1 million matching challenge for the theatre's *Raise the Curtain* fundraising campaign. By July, Hartford Stage had met the challenge and surpassed its fundraising goal for the campaign and immediately announced plans to reopen in October with a full five-play mainstage season plus a holiday performance. Bensussen said: "Our intermission is over! There is much to celebrate as we raise the curtain and invite everyone to join us for a season of plays that will re-connect us to each other. I cannot wait to see everyone in person again. ¡Me alegra darles la bienvenida de nuevo!" (Glad to welcome you back!)

The 2021-22 season will include: *Ah, Wilderness!* by Eugene O'Neill; *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* adapted by Joe Landry; *Angry, Raucous and Shamelessly Gorgeous* by Pearl Cleage; *Dishwasher Dreams* by Alaudin Ullah; and *Lost in Yonkers* by Neil Simon. All performances will be held at the 50 Church Street theatre in Hartford, newly named for Stanley Black + Decker in recognition of their leadership support of Hartford Stage's *Raise the Curtain* campaign.

With substantial new fundraising and a new play festival featuring Latinx and Hispanic playwrights, there is promise for what lies ahead with this new leadership team.

JAN MASON

Western Connecticut State University

HUNTINGTON THEATRE

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 2020-21

Black Beans Project Melinda Lopez (11 May–20 June), online streaming performance.***The Niceties*** Eleanor Burgess (27 May–13 June), online streaming performance.

As is a familiar story in the theatre world, the Huntington Theatre Company ended its 2019-2020 season abruptly with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Last season's review documented the Huntington's initial plans for rescheduling with an optimistic eye towards reopening, despite announcing eleven layoffs and forty-six furloughs—nearly two-thirds of its staff—beginning in July 2020. This season provided the Huntington several pressing opportunities to regroup, rebrand, and literally rebuild itself as the company prepares to reopen in August 2021.

In lieu of in-person performances, the Huntington offered a variety of streaming performances and educational opportunities for remote learners. First, it produced a series of fifteen short audio dramas entitled *Dream Boston*. First released in July 2020 and available to stream online for free (on its website and other platforms such as Apple, Spotify, SoundCloud, and YouTube), the series of eight to twenty minute dramas featured contributions from local playwrights reflecting on favorite Boston locations to connect with others in a post-COVID world; billed as a glimpse of the future “somewhere between dream and reality,” these pieces bring together characters in settings as different as the top of MIT's great dome and a bus stop on Malcolm X Boulevard. An audio adaptation of Mike Lew's *Tiger Style!*, which premiered at the Huntington in 2016, was broadcast on the radio 6 February 2021; it was subsequently available to stream as both a four-part podcast and as a virtual reading in American Sign Language.

Two virtual shows were available for on-demand streaming. First, *Black Beans Project*, by artist-in-residence Melinda Lopez, is a virtual discussion between two siblings (Joel Perez and Lopez herself) as they cope with distance and family trauma through cooking the eponymous dish together. Additionally, in association with the Manhattan Theatre Club, the company produced an adaptation of Eleanor Burgess's *The Niceties*. Originally staged at the Huntington in 2018, this adaptation moves the setting of a confrontational conversation between professor and student from the former's office to Skype. The filmed production, available to stream for free, reunited the original director and cast, including Lisa Banes, who tragically lost her life in



Melinda Lopez and Joel Perez in *Black Beans Project*. Photo: Courtesy Huntington Theatre

a hit-and-run accident in New York City in June 2021. Both productions used the familiar side-by-side screens of video conferencing software, not merely to bring together two actors from different locations, but as a natural setting for the pieces themselves.

Off stage, the Huntington's Education Department launched Huntington@Homeschool in March 2020 to provide theatre-related educational resources to remote students: guest lectures, workshops, and courses in acting, directing, playwriting and script analysis. The program, which was extended for the entirety of the 2020-21 season, connected over 600 students in twenty-three states, as well as internationally, at no cost for anyone under eighteen.

While the 2019-20 season began with positive local press, naming the Huntington as one of the best theatres in Boston, this past season found the Huntington struggling with negative publicity. In June 2020, the Huntington formed the Huntington Equity Anti-Racism ("HEAR") Task Force in conjunction with Human Resources consultants The Wellspring Group. While providing training for the company, its mission of reshaping the culture at the Huntington was put to the test almost immediately when, in August 2020, an Instagram account called "Boston BIPOC Theatre" provided a space for artists, staff, and patrons to anonymously share negative experiences; many of these were directed at the Huntington, revealing a discrep-

ancy between public and private experiences regarding race. Additionally, in October 2020, Artistic Director Peter DuBois resigned after an investigation into multiple concerns over his management of the theatre company. As documented in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*, the complaints about him (and the company itself) included the handling of pandemic-related layoffs and furloughs, salary disparity, concerns over diversity and treatment of BIPOC artists/staff, a retaliatory working environment, and other negative experiences shared anonymously. In response to all of this, the Huntington's website currently lists its full anti-racism policy, HEAR's objectives in hiring a new Artistic Director, as well as new procedures for how the theatre will hire, train, and interact with all employees.

In the wake of these upheavals, in March 2021 the Huntington announced that it finally was breaking ground on the years-planned renovations for the main performance space on Huntington Avenue. The beginning of this eighteen-month project, undertaken with the rationale that the theatre had to be closed anyway, will place most of the 2021-2022 theatre season at its second location, the Calderwood Pavilion. The next season, announced in April 2021, consists of the two shows that were not performed last season because of the pandemic—*Our Daughters*, *Like Pillars* and *The Bluest Eye*—as well as five additional plays, some initially planned for the 2020-21 season: *Hurricane Diane*, *Witch*, *Teenage Dick*, *What the Constitution Means to Me*, and *Common Ground Revisited*. With an upcoming season made up of primarily new (or newer) works, it does point to a different direction for the Huntington, which had always been trying to find the balance between contemporary and older works.

With the Huntington preparing for its 40th season under the banner of “The New Huntington,” the website describes a “bold vision” for reopening with a clear sense of direction. Under new leadership, with much of the staff returning to work, in a reinvigorated space, and with determination to learn, the Huntington has all the tools it needs to live up to the self-ascribed moniker of Boston's “leading professional theatre company.” This comes with high expectations, both internally and externally, and a willingness to keep the conversation going.

JARROD DEPRADO
Sacred Heart University

LONG WHARF THEATRE

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, 2020-21

Season Kickoff Event (16 Sept.)

All Rise, a discussion of the legacy of RBG (29 Oct.)

A Little Bit of Death (13 & 14 Nov. live, rescheduled to 9 to 11 Dec. online)

Cocktails & Conversation, the prop shop (16 Nov.)

Play Club, **The Crucible** (18 Nov.)New Works Festival, with **The Merit System** and **Dream Hou\$e** (4-6 Dec.)Play Club, **Fences** (16 Dec.)Play Club, **The Amen Corner** (20 Jan.)Cocktails & Conversation, the costume shop and costume design of **I Am My Own Wife** (1 Feb.)

The LAB, art-making under the Biden administration (12 Feb.)

Play Club, **The Great Leap** (17 Feb.)

Strength Within Me, panel discussion (8 Mar.)

Cocktails & Conversation, Theatre Forward's spotlight on Long Wharf (10 Mar.)

Play Club, **Dance Nation** (17 Mar.)

Shared Experience, the African diaspora (25 Mar.)

August Wilson Monologue Competition (3 Apr.)

The LAB, an environmentalist play workshop (9 Apr.)

Play Club, **Queen** (21 Apr.)

Shared Experience, the Jewish diaspora (29 Apr.)

Play Club, **Passing Strange** (19 May)

Shared Experience, the Asian diaspora (20 May)

Yerba Bruja, (video on demand 10-25 Jun.)

The LAB, HIV+ narratives in theatre (9 Jul)

Experiment Time (13-15 Aug. live)

Long Wharf's 2020-21 season, *One City, Many Stages*, was a series of events to amplify the voices of BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ creators, using theatre as a catalyst for social justice. "I want art and activism to live side by side," explains artistic director Jacob Padrón in a YouTube video on the Long Wharf Theatre homepage. The pandemic made it impossible for Long Wharf to present any in-person performances (although it tried). Instead, Long Wharf presented video tours of Long Wharf's facilities, on-line discussions, and virtual performances, and also published a hard-copy literature and arts journal, *Kaleidoscope*. "Kaleidoscope" is a good metaphor for Long Wharf's



The video production *Yerba Bruja* took its name from a medicinal plant that can survive hostile conditions. It was offered as a metaphor in this tale of the survival of diasporic communities.

PHOTO: MAZA MONTEIRO REY (SHE/HER)

season and mission of bringing the New Haven community together: it's a device that creates beautiful, shifting images from multi-colored fragments. At the Kickoff Event, Padrón called it "an emergent season," with offerings being developed in response to current local, national, and international events.

The season was funded by ticket sales for the few ticketed events, donations, and memberships, making Long Wharf, in a new initiative, a member-supported arts organization. Memberships were by a \$10 per month subscription or \$150 per household for this first year. Memberships in the subsequent season will be by monthly, sustaining subscriptions. However, most of the events this season were free to all, regardless of membership status.

The Cocktails and Conversations video tours of the prop and costume shops gave viewers a look at these facilities, famous in the Connecticut non-profit theatre world. The on-line costume shop conversation particularly interested me. It was a discussion with the costume design team, including the designer Daniele Mathews, and the actor, Mason Alexander Park, about the design choices for last season's *I Am My Own Wife*, and about working as trans people. A cultural competency consultant helped the process. Park found the consultant helpful for removing language problems, letting him focus on his work as an actor. Mathews added that it is useful to

have an expert on queer perspectives, even with a queer team; queer people themselves do not necessarily understand the perspectives of other queer people. The on-line audience could pose questions via chat.

Play Club was a series of Zoom conversations about play scripts, starting with *The Crucible*, the opening show for Long Wharf Theatre in 1965. The Play Club sessions were led by Long Wharf's Cheyenne Barboza and Jacob Padrón, along with Kate Moore Heaney, a member of the literary team. The number of participants was limited to fit one Zoom screen; we could see each other. I found the discussions enlightening, even if I did not always agree. I heard views on the child-rearing in August Wilson's *Fences* that were foreign to me.

The virtual performances were pre-recorded with performers in separate spaces (often called "Zoom theatre"), or videos with performers in the same scene together. *Dream House*, part of the New Works Festival, was one of the better Zoom theatre productions I've seen this year. Changes in camera perspective in addition to changes to the backgrounds made for interesting images in this story of gentrification and family history.

A live performance was attempted with *A Little Bit of Death*, a ticketed event to be presented outdoors in New Haven's Edgerton Park, November 13 and 14. The Park would have provided open air and social distancing for the audience to experience the series of solo performances, but Connecticut's COVID-19 infection rate rose, forcing state authorities to limit gatherings outdoors to fifty people, including performers and crew. That made presenting the show with a live audience impossible, so it was converted to a recorded performance shot on the Claire Tow Stage and broadcast in December.

Long Wharf Theatre is working to get back to live, in-person performance later this summer with *Experiment Time*. That show, scheduled for August 13 through 15, after this review is due, is planned to be a live, one-person show by Hasan Minhaj on the Claire Tow Stage, and a screen-free event. Cell phones and smart watches will be locked in Yondr pouches; anyone seen using a device during the performance will be escorted out by security.

Long Wharf's 2021-22 season is planned to be back in the theatre with face-to-face live performances, starting with the resurrection of *The Chinese Lady*, the show abandoned during dress rehearsals in March 2020. This will be followed by Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*. Next is *Dream House*, live on-stage, not in Zoom boxes. The season will end with *Queen*,

Madhuri Shekar's drama connecting research ethics, bee colony collapse, and Monsanto. In addition to these productions, Long Wharf will continue to offer on-line events and smaller in-person events, such as *Catharsissy*, a solo cabaret act starring Mason Alexander Park, the lead from *I Am My Own Wife*. The ticket prices have not been announced, but they will be supported by the \$10 per month memberships, allowing them to be lower. All audiences, from the theatre-loving to the theatre-curious, are invited to find their seat at Long Wharf Theatre.

KARL G. RULING

PORTLAND STAGE COMPANY

PORTLAND, MAINE, 2020-21

Talley's Folly Lanford Wilson (In person 29 Oct. – 15 Nov.; online 9 Nov. – 29 Nov.)

A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens (In person 4 Dec. – 24 Dec.; online 15 Dec. – 10 Jan.)

Or Liz Duffy Adams (In person 29 Jan. – February 14; online 10 Feb. – 28 Feb.)

Bad Dates Theresa Rebeck (In person 16 Apr. – 2 May; online 28 Apr. – 16 May)

Where We Stand Donnetta Lavinia Grays (In person 21 May – 6 Jun.; online 2 Jun. – 20 Jun.)

Last year, Portland Stage Company dedicated its 46th season to the powers of transformation that can come through empathy and open-mindedness. The company's pre-pandemic line-up included Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*; Brendan Pelsue's *Read to Me*; a radio-play adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life*; and the triumphant homecoming of John Cariani's *Almost, Maine*, the international hit that premiered at PSC. The pandemic struck just as Karen Zacarias's *Native Gardens* opened, resulting in a pivot that brought it online for asynchronous streaming. The remaining two shows planned for the regular 2019-20 season, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Willy Holtzman's musical *Sabina*, were not produced, and neither was a summer co-production with Maine State Music Theatre of the jukebox show *Ring of Fire*.

Portland Stage has remained solvent and busy through the pandemic, with the help of the Paycheck Protection Program, and was one of only a few theaters that Actors' Equity allowed to reopen for live theatre. A new HVAC system was installed, and the theatre's safety plan included mandatory masks, limited audience capacity, and weekly COVID tests for cast and crew. All plays were also filmed and made available for asynchronous online viewing (via Vimeo), which is how this reviewer experienced the season.



Tracey Conyer Lee in *Where We Stand*. PHOTO: MICAL HUTSON

The theatre's safety plan also influenced the season's line-up: all shows had a running time of under two hours, with no intermission, and casts of no more than three actors— including one two-hander acted by a “pod”; i.e., a married couple. That show was the season opener *Talley's Folley* by Lanford Wilson. Under the direction of Sally Wood and starring the marvelous PSC veterans — and real-life couple — David Mason and Kathy McCafferty, this production was a rich, nuanced, and tender portrait of an uncommon love. Even viewed online, Anita Stewart's set design soared, with its wonderfully precarious-looking wooden boathouse. And Mason and McCafferty gave the smart lovers a bravery that was both a force and a solace.

For its holiday show, Portland Stage opted for a one-man *A Christmas Carol*. Adapted by and starring veteran actor Joel Leffert, directed by Anita Stewart, and with live Foley effects by Nancy Nichols, this moving production revived both the terror and redemption of the well-weathered parable. Leffert's performance was marvelously protean, and his work was echoed and enriched by Nichols's spooky sounds at the Foley table. The show's dim, near-bare stage gave the story an almost Jungian quality, as if these terrifying spirits and their reproaches all emerge out of the man himself — perhaps the scariest kind of ghost story.

For its first show of 2021, fittingly, Portland Stage presented a show set in a time of plague and fires, political upheaval, and the uncertainties of a new transition of power. In Liz Duffy Adams's *Or*, that period is Restoration England. Directed by Aileen Wen McGroddy, in a Winnepesaukee Playhouse (Meredith, New Hampshire) production, *Or* is the story of former spy and would-be playwright (and real-life historical figure) Aphra Behn (Rebecca Tucker) — notably, for the time, a woman. Aphra and her friends were delightfully gender-fluid in the hands of Tucker, sensual Nicholas Wilder as King Charles, and gamine Haley Jones as actress Nell Gwynne. Billed as a sex farce, *Or* also posed poignant questions for any troubled time: whose voices will tell our stories, and whose voices will we remember?

The season swung lighter with PSC's next show, Theresa Rebeck's *Bad Dates*. Directed by Jade Carroll King, *Bad Dates* starred Annie Henk as Haley, a single mom who braves the world of dating after a long hiatus. Henk's portrayal was winning, buoyant, and funny; she paced Haley's mono-

logue with the cadences of conversation. And under King's spirited direction, Henk kept that conversation moving fluently as she tried on outfit after outfit, readying for the next date.

Portland Stage closed its regular season with a show tailored to be set right here in Portland, a moving one-woman show that asked us to think consciously about community. In *Where We Stand*, a rich and rhythmic parable in song and verse written by Donnetta Lavinia Grays, one lonely man (Tracey Conyer Lee) has made a bad deal with a Stranger in a gold suit. Deftly directed by Kevin R. Free, the production featured a superb, scintillating solo performance by actress Lee as "the man." *Where I Stand* reminded Portlanders that we have a choice about what kind of community we want to live in.

Over the last year, theatres everywhere have also confronted the crisis ongoing racial inequity. Portland Stage responded by issuing a Statement of Solidarity and Racial Equity. "As a predominately white theatre company in Portland," the company announced, "we need to educate ourselves and invite our community to join us as we seek to find ways to help change our world and learn to practice anti-racism." This commitment has included work to bring anti-racist practices in the theatre's Strategic Plan.

Portland Stage also continued with its regular secondary programs, including the 2020 Clauder Competition and 2021 Little Festival of the Unexpected, which was live-streamed this year (on Zoom) and which featured awardees *Rx Machina*, by Caity-Shea Violette; *The Last Ship to Proxima Centauri*, by Greg Lam; and *In His Hands*, by Benjamin Benne. The weekly children's programming, *Play Me A Story*, also live-streamed (on Facebook), and was offered free of charge.

Finally, Portland Stage also offered free digital streaming tickets of Mainstage shows to healthcare workers. In this and many ways, Portland Stage supported theater and community in a time when stories became ever more precious to all of us.

MEGAN GRUMBLING
Southern Maine Community College
University of New England

SHAKESPEARE & COMPANY

LENOX, MASSACHUSETTS, 2020

Martha Mitchell Calling Jodi Rothe (28 - 30 Oct., 1 Nov.), filmed and streamed online.

Shakespeare & Company ended its 2019 season with the Donald Margulies drama *Time Stands Still*. The title was prophetic. Time did indeed stand still in the coming year as the COVID pandemic gripped the country and the world. Theatres across the nation closed their doors to prevent the spread of the virus and Shakespeare & Company was no exception. The theatre officially postponed its 2020 season, cancelled all in-person educational and performance training programs, and furloughed most of its full-time staff of twenty-six. To meet the lost revenue, the theatre initiated the Springboard Campaign, whose goal was to raise \$500,000.

With its several stages dark, the company turned to a different medium to bring in patrons and serve the community – film. Starting in late July and running through mid-September, Shakespeare & Company collaborated with the Berkshire International Film Festival (BIFF) to show movies in a temporary drive-in, the first of its kind in Berkshire County in twenty-five years. A stretched screen was affixed to the south wing of St. Martin's Hall across from the entry driveway and up to forty-two cars were accommodated with “social spreading” in the adjacent parking lot.

“We have to take stock of so much these days,” said Artistic Director Allyn Burrows. “If we can look back on certain things such as drive-ins nostalgically, it gives us all a chance to heal.”

Healing continued with a filmed theatre production, shown virtually. *Martha Mitchell Calling* by Jodi Rothe had been first performed live at Shakespeare & Company back in 2006 with Annette Miller as the notoriously opinionated Washington wife. She reprised the role in this new production, filmed at nearby Ventfort Hall, a restored Gilded Age mansion. It was directed by Mark Farrell and produced by Elizabeth Aspenlieder. Kale Browne played John Mitchell, Martha's husband and President Nixon's Attorney General, in this two-character piece. The play takes place on the night before her husband's trial in 1975 for his involvement in the Watergate break-in. Miller delivered a lively portrait of the loquacious Mitchell (known as “Mouth of the South”). Along the way, the playwright packs in some surprising details. Who knew that husband John was originally a Democrat



Annette Miller in *Martha Mitchell Calling* (2006 production).PHOTO: KEVIN SPRAGUE

who Martha cajoled into joining the Nixon administration and that Pat Nixon disapproved of Martha's cleavage!

While Nixon once called Mitchell "his secret weapon," when the Watergate scandal broke, she was one of the first to call for the president's resignation. That got her into hot water with the White House and eventually ended her marriage. The dramatic transitions in Martha's story seemed at times fuzzy, possibly because the film was an abridged sixty-minute version of the original play. More would, in this case, have been better. But the playwright draws some intriguing parallels to the Trump era, having her protagonist announce at one point that "the best liar gets to be the president."

Dead at age fifty-seven from cancer, Martha Mitchell was, in the words of reporter Helen Thomas, who was her frequent confidante, a "heroine." At the end of the play, Miller, still in character, urged the virtual audience to help "get out the vote" and put out of office a president more dangerous than Nixon. As Miller said in one interview, "We need a Martha now."

As the COVID lockdown continued into the late fall and winter, the theatre moved its annual gala fund-raiser online, streaming it in early December. Filmed largely on the grounds of the theatre's expansive campus, it consisted of amusing excerpts from Shakespeare's plays (*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*); brief documentary pieces; and testimonials about the theatre's outreach, including the educational and actor training programs. The culminating event of the student program, the Fall Festival of Shakespeare, was also held virtually in December with the participation of thirty students from eight Berkshire County schools.

The gala fittingly ended with Burrows sitting in a theatre seat, waiting patiently for the curtain to rise again. "We'll see you next season if not before," he promised. Four months later, with vaccinations on the rise and the pandemic fading, the theatre announced a full 2021 season, starting with the one holdover from last season, *King Lear*, directed by Nicole Ricciardi and starring Christopher Lloyd. Time marches on and so does Shakespeare & Company.

STEVEN OTFINOSKI
Fairfield University

TRINITY REPERTORY THEATRE COMPANY

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 2020-21

A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens (17 Dec. – 10 Jan.), online streaming performance.***The Catastrophist*** Lauren M. Gunderson, commissioned by Marin Theatre Company and co-produced by Round House Theatre and Marin Theatre Company (18 Mar. – 31 May), online streaming performance.

The Trinity Repertory Theatre Company remained closed during the entire 2020–21 season. It stayed in contact with the community through press releases and social media. Despite keeping on only essential staff during the closure, Trinity maintained its look toward the future, taking a hard look at how it operates, primarily in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and how it would become an anti-racist institution. It also produced the annual *Christmas Carol* for online streaming as well as hosted *The Catastrophist* in collaboration with the Marin Theatre Company and Round House Theatre.

Trinity Rep's commitment to the forty-three-year tradition of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* took the company into the uncharted territory of filmmaking for online streaming. The production could be viewed for free thanks to corporate and individual donations, which made the performance more accessible than ever. The staging took place in the homes of the actors in self recordings via Zoom; in-person filming on the streets of Providence; in and around the theatre spaces; and with animated illustrations. The resident acting company portrayed all the roles with Joe Wilson Jr. playing Ebenezer Scrooge. The annual show was an ambitious undertaking that raised the spirits of all who regularly attend the production. It was truly inspiring to witness the great lengths they went to keep the tradition alive.

The Catastrophist by Lauren Gunderson is a one-man show about her husband, Dr. Nathan Wolfe, who was one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people for his work tracking viral pandemics. His Jewish upbringing and relationship with his father were the foundation of the story coupled with a phrase from the Talmud, "Save one life, save the world." Nathan's obsession with saving lives drove his passion into a career of virology. William DeMerritt played the role of Nathan, and his performance was masterful. His harness of the material and his perceived understanding of the science was remarkable. Jasson Minadakis, Artistic Director of Marin



Joe Wilson Jr. as Scrooge during the filming of the on-demand production of *A Christmas Carol*. Photo: Amanda Downing Carney

Theatre Company and Director, commissioned Gunderson to write this play as a virtual production, and Trinity Rep was one of ten theatres throughout the country to produce it. The staging and cinematography were done with exquisite precision. The camera became a character in the storytelling, which gave the production a very theatrical feel. The limitations of a black box theatre were a deliberate choice of simplicity for this overly complicated scientific story. The staging remained only in the black empty space accented with specific lighting looks for the shifting narratives. By employing theatrical conventions, the show never became overly cinematic, which made this digital production a real success.

Trinity Rep aspires to be an anti-racist institution. The nationwide reckoning of systematic racism that ignited after the murder of George Floyd and the formation of WSYWAT (“We See You White American Theatre”) activated Trinity Rep to take a hard look at the DEI work begun in 2016. As outlined on the “Anti-Racism at Trinity Rep” page on the website, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) company members penned a letter to the leadership informing them of the harm they have done and continue to

perpetuate in the artistic and financial life of the company. Trinity has met those demands head on and has spent the season shaping what would be the future of the company.

It first hired DEI consultants who conducted a comprehensive audit of current and past practices, which resulted in the development of a three-year strategic plan that was presented to the board of trustees in June 2021. It also implemented a series of training sessions with the board, senior management, and artistic and management staff in bystander intervention and anti-bias training.

To improve work conditions, administrators eliminated “10 out of 12” rehearsals as well as overlapping productions in the two theatres to make the work more equitable and more humane. They also raised salaries to meet median theatre industry rates, which will be reflected in the rehiring of administrative and production staff. Other changes instituted are trainings in the costume department to work with Black hair and make-up to better support BIPOC performers; the creation of a new administrative position, Director of Service and Experience, that will decentralize the transactional nature of theatre and its patrons to focus more on experience and relationships; and the hiring of more BIPOC administrators and staff, which is in line with Trinity’s commitment to its DEI strategic plan.

The America Too initiative completed its fifth year at Trinity Rep and was co-produced with the Providence Public Library. The primary purpose of America Too is to engage with the community at large utilizing the art of theatre as the vehicle for conversations. This year’s title was *Reckoning and Resilience*, which was a five-part live online series that raised the voices of the community through the following themes: *It’s Our Education, It’s Our People, It’s Our Health, It’s Our Service*. The series ended with a live in-person event in collaboration with community partner RI Latino Arts and Black Lives Matter public artists. This season’s participants included high school students, business owners, area teachers, medical professionals, community activists, artists, and politicians. Trinity Rep’s ongoing work in community engagement is stronger than ever and truly connects with its mission to “Reinvent the Public Square.”

Trinity Rep’s 2021–22 season will be live and in person and will open with *A Christmas Carol*, directed by Joe Wilson Jr., followed by *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed, adapted for the stage by Nia Vardalos and co-conceived by Marshall Heyman and Thomas Kail, *Gem of the Ocean* by August

Wilson, *Sueño*, translated and adapted by José Rivera, and *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury.

CHRISTOPHER R. HOYT
Moses Brown School

VERMONT STAGE THEATRE
BURLINGTON, VERMONT, 2020-21

A *Christmas Carol* adaptation by Jefferson Mays, Susan Lyons, and Michael Arden, presented in collaboration with TBD Pictures (28 Nov. 2020 – 3 Jan. 2021), video on demand.

The American Dream Project, in collaboration with Middlebury Actor's Theatre, and Town Hall Theatre (13 Dec. 2020 – 16 May 2021), broadcast via Zoom.

Popcorn Falls James Hindman (28 July – 8 Aug. 2021), live outdoor production.

Maytag Virgin Audrey Cefaly (25 Aug. – 5 Sept. 2021), live outdoor production.

Like the experience of most regional theatres, the pandemic abruptly ended Vermont Stage's 2019-20 season and had a significant and negative impact on the 2020-21 season. Two days after Vermont's governor, Phil Scott, declared a state of emergency, Cristina Alicea, Vermont Stage's Artistic Director, sent an email to patrons canceling the final week of performances of George Brant's two-hander *Marie and Rosetta*, as well as the scheduled production of Lee Hall's *The Pittman Painters*. Fortunately, the fall production of *The Last Wide Open* and winter production of *relativity* successfully opened and closed prior to the public health crisis began. In her initial pandemic email, Alicea was hopeful that the company would return for a live performance of their annual Bake-Off production scheduled for early June. The theatre never reopened for live performances.

Although the theatre was technically "on hiatus" for the 2020-21 season, the shutdown did not wholly end Vermont Stage's attempts to connect with its loyal audience. Rather, the pandemic forced Vermont Stage to radically reimagine its typical offerings and production schedule and created new opportunities for inter-theatre collaborations. For example, Vermont Stage partnered with Middlebury Acting Company and Town Hall Theatre on a monthly, online play reading and discussion series called *The American Dream Project* that ran from 13 December 2020 to 16 May 2021. Meeting every second Sunday, the series focused on plays exploring the Black experi-



Still of Sarah Mell in “Actor Sarah Mell talks Popcorn Falls by James Hindman,” promotional video, Vermont Stage

ence and racism in the United States, including *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage and *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Most of the plays in the series were by Black playwrights except for Rebecca Gilman’s *Spinning into Butter* and *The Niceties* by Eleanor Burgess, both of which spotlight systemic racism in higher education, offering a potent reminder that even the most progressive of primarily white institutions have a lot of work to do. Although pitched as a play reading series, event organizers structured the series as a discussion group by asking participants to read each play prior to the event. Each event had a moderator tasked with leading the discussion and local artists who read pre-selected scenes. While neither Vermont Stage nor its partners framed the series as a direct response to the protests following George Floyd’s murder or as a reflection of the racial reckoning taking place in theatre nationwide following the publication of the “We See You White American Theatre” letter and subsequent demands, the series appeared to be a timely, if small-scale response to both. According to the website, all proceeds from the series went to Middlebury Acting Company, which did not help offset Vermont Stage’s lost income, but it did help keep theatre alive for its most engaged audience members.

In December, the company managed to produce a high-quality video version of its annual winter fundraiser that featured local actors and singers

in solo or small group performances. Alicea initiated other similar attempts to stay connected with the company's audience throughout the year, even when the virtual productions on offer did not feature Vermont Stage artists or financially support the company. From November to December, Vermont Stage collaborated with TBD Pictures to provide a Video on Demand one-man production of *A Christmas Carol* featuring Jefferson Mays and directed by Michael Arden with music by Sufjan Stevens. Several other regional companies in other states also hosted the same video production as part of their seasons. In March, a full year after the pandemic forced Vermont Stage's previous season to end, Alicea sent out a link to Lincoln Center's free, archived production of *Vanya and Sonia and Sasha and Spike*. In doing so, she reminded her audience of the company's 2013 production of the same play and teased an upcoming outdoor summer season.

In July 2021 the company began rehearsals for James Hindman's *Popcorn Falls* directed by Alicea and has announced a second summer production of *Maytag Virgin* by Audrey Cefaly that will run in August and early September. The company branded this outdoor summer season as a "relaunch" and will produce both plays at outdoor venues in Williston, Vermont, just outside of Burlington. The company will present *Popcorn Falls* at the Isham Family Farm as part of the farm's "First: Earth Summer Series," which features performances by a range of other theatres and artists coupled with a series of environmental lectures. This comedic play about a town trying to save itself by producing a play feels like a welcome opportunity to laugh after over a year of missing live theatre, while the subsequent offering of *Maytag Virgin* at Blue Pond feels like a return to the kind of quiet, new work that the company excels at producing. In addition to presenting these two shows in outdoor venues, where ventilation and physical distancing may be less of an issue than in a traditional venue, the theatre also has promised opportunities for patrons to stream the performances from their own homes. If outdoor summer productions continue in future seasons, they may prove to be a welcome addition to the company's offerings and its bottom line.

The theatre has not officially announced a 2021-22 season, but this summer "relaunch" provides a promising start. That Vermont Stage has been able to shift its season schedule and venue so dramatically proves that the company under Alicea's nimble leadership is determined to do what it takes to survive the pandemic. Although the company has promised to return to its relatively new production home at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center, it is

weighing audience comfort with attending live performances alongside the ongoing public health crisis of COVID-19.

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YALE REPERTORY THEATRE
NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, 2020-21

No productions.

Yale Rep spent the pandemic year tightly shuttered. Because it is the professional theatre in residence at the Yale School of Drama (newly rechristened the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University—more details below), a joint announcement was made 16 June 2020 that neither the Rep nor the School of Drama would produce a season of plays in 2020-21 due to the on-going health crisis. Because “practical production work is a central tenet of the School’s conservatory training,” a press release announced, “the three-year MFA program is being extended temporarily to a fourth year to best meet and overcome the current and inevitable future disruptions of the pandemic. Similarly, the one-year Technical Internship program will be extended by one semester. The School’s next student recruitment cycle will be for admission in the fall of 2022.” The announcement further noted that “the cost to students of this additional year/semester will be underwritten entirely by the School.” The relationship of the Rep to the School is described on Yale’s website as analogous to that of a medical school and teaching hospital, with a fluid correlation between conservatory and professional practice.

In lieu of producing theatre, Yale focused on rethinking its mission, goals, and theatre practice from the dual perspectives of humanitarianism and anti-racism. Even before COVID-19 struck, the Rep had planned to cut back to a five-day work week prior to technical rehearsals and encourage what the Deans describe as “self-care as an antidote to the exhaustion that many people regard as a field-wide norm and manifestation of a culture of white supremacy.” Commitments to anti-racism were published on the Rep’s website in June with updates in September 2020, along with information on Yale’s initiatives, begun in 2016, for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of pedagogy and practice. These include on-going workshops and special trainings, led by Yale faculty Carmen Morgan (artEquity) and Nicole



Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven. PHOTO: YALE REP PHOTO ARCHIVE.

Brewer (anti-racist theatre), and open to all faculty, staff, and students, as well as a mandatory new course, Drama 3a/b, Toward Anti-Racist Theater Practice, where students and faculty interact as fellow learners.

Unlike other New England regional theatres, which produced a steady stream of online events—performances, readings, lectures, discussion groups, classes—Yale Rep offered only a virtual newsletter, *The Prompter*, to its community. *The Prompter* is a rich stew of images and information—it was a great resource on coping strategies and how-tos regarding COVID-19 (e.g., how to properly wear a mask and practice safe social distancing) in the early days of the pandemic—theatre features (lighting, props, playwrighting), noted alumni profiles, book reviews, community news, activities to do with children during COVID, and lots of recipes for food, drink, and Shakespeare-inspired eating, with a recipe for Chicken Kiev that is likened to the inner richness of his verse. Each issue offered a short, streamed performance—a song, short video, lecture of interest—reminding readers that performance is what Yale is all about. Initially published bi-weekly beginning in April 2020, it soon switched to monthly publication, and continued through May 2021, when it celebrated the Yale Drama class of 2021. *The Prompter* is on hiatus for summer 2021 but will return in August to promote

the upcoming academic year and new Rep season, which will begin in January 2022.

The Rep announced a three-show January-June 2022 season that focuses exclusively on BIPOC artists. The opening production will be *Today is My Birthday*, a comedy about loneliness in the age of connectivity, by Susan Soon He Stanton and directed by Mina Morita. A revival of resident playwright Tarrell Alvin McCraney's musical play, *Choir Boy*, directed by Christopher D. Betts, will open in late March. The season will conclude with *Between Two Knees*, the first play written by the intertribal Native American sketch comedy troupe, The 1491s, with members in Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Montana. Eric Ting, the former associate artistic director at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre and an artist long committed to presenting the work of new and diverse theatre voices, will direct. The abbreviated season of three rather than five plays, as well as the delayed season opening, is attributed to the continuing uncertainties of the pandemic and Yale's commitment to maintaining the health and well-being of its community. "We are increasing emphasis on process and quality and decreasing emphasis on product and quantity," Yale Rep Artistic Director and Drama School Dean Bundy noted, affirming the faculty and staff's decisions, which were further informed by what he described as "limited financial resources." This announcement was made 22 June; two weeks later, Yale gloriously heralded the largest financial boon of its history.

"An extraordinary and unprecedented gift" of \$150 million from philanthropist and arts advocate David Geffen was announced 7 July, prompting an immediate renaming of the Drama School to honor Geffen's largesse. This money ensures that all full-time students in degree and certificate programs will enjoy 100% tuition-free study beginning with the 2021-22 academic year. "Removing the tuition barrier will allow an even greater diversity of talented people to develop and hone their skills in front of, on, and behind Yale's stages," Geffen remarked, which is right in line with Yale's anti-racist and humanitarian initiatives. Undoubtedly, this gift will help alleviate financial burdens caused by the pandemic and will ensure the continued prosperity of the Rep and the School.

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