

Slowly Emerging from a Pandemic

The theater is an art form scaled to the human, and stubbornly so, relying on the absolute necessity of physical audience . . . A living actor before a living audience. The situation of all theater, a situation that can awaken in us a recollection of something more primordial, religious ritual—the site of our earliest collective negotiations with our tremendous vulnerability to existence. The act of gathering to witness the myths of our alleged origins enacted—this is the root of the theater’s timeless magic.¹

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar delivered these words in December 2017 in his acceptance speech for the 2017 Steinberg Playwright Award, over two years before the March 2020 shuttering of theatres worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Akhtar offers scientific evidence for his assertion, citing a group of neuroscientists who “discovered that watching live theater can synchronize the heartbeats of an audience” in an experience “extraordinary enough to overcome group differences and produce a common physiological experience.” Our Hartford Stage reviewer, Jan Mason, quotes Akhtar in describing the thrill she and fellow audience members experienced in returning to live performance this past season. From all reports, it is safe to say that this shared exuberance was at the core of the 2021-22 theatre season, when the nation and the world joyously reopened theatres and slowly began to emerge from the pandemic.

This was not a seamless emergence, however; COVID continued to resurge throughout the season as performances were cancelled or migrated to digital versions so artists and audiences could remain safe. As we go to press in July 2022, most *NETIR* and other theatres nationwide retain some degree of COVID regulations, often still requiring audiences to be fully vaccinated and boosted (there are now two booster shots available for adults) and to wear masks fully covering the nose and mouth. Broadway theatres recently relaxed rules, largely to their peril as shows continue to be cancelled due to COVID outbreaks among cast and crew. Despite setbacks and this most stubborn of

viruses (a new variant, Omicron BA.5, is driving up cases across the country), the show does go on as theatres have proven their mettle as dauntless forces, finding ways to maintain safety and lure audiences back. They also are recruiting, not just their mainstay audiences, but first-time theatregoers—ethnically and sociologically diverse folks who never crossed their thresholds before the pandemic because the chosen shows did not speak to them—to come inside. The second pillar of the enforced shutdown, the re-emergence of Black Lives Matter as a potent force, coupled with “We See You White American Theatre,” has had a profound effect on what theatres are programming, who are the artists, onstage and off, and what new audiences are in attendance. This difference is palpable at not-for-profit theatres across the country and even on Broadway, which has produced more BIPOC-written and produced (actors, directors, designers) shows than ever before in its history. At *NETIR* theatres, a quick glance at the season lineups demonstrates the sea change in programming, covered in detail in the ensuing pages. All *NETIR* theatres are also taking their commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) seriously and, as they are re-opening, are striving to present themselves as revitalized, forward-thinking institutions attuned to their communities and willing to listen and respond accordingly.

As reported last year, all *NETIR* theatres survived the pandemic and in 2021-22 all produced a season of plays, some with fewer offerings than in previous years. All also have announced 2022-23 seasons so even if houses weren't as full as in previous years and box office receipts not as robust, the theatres are pressing on. Boston's Huntington Theatre will finally reopen its main house, which it now owns outright, in fall 2022 after pandemic woes interrupted the long-planned renovation of the historic venue on Huntington Avenue, which, when it opened in 1925, was the first purpose-built civic theatre in the United States. Simultaneously, the Huntington is welcoming its new Artistic Director, Loretta Greco, who formerly helmed San Francisco's Magic and New York's WP theatres, both noted for innovative programming of women and BIPOC playwrights and edgy new work. This means that six of our eleven *NETIR* theatres—over half—will be run by women artistic directors, a significant shift from 2019, when there were only four.

The other significant shift is at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, which will be permanently leaving its home of fifty-seven years to become an itinerant theatre in the New Haven community (see Karl Ruling's review for details). By relinquishing its physical plant, which was rented as a temporary

space from the New England Food Terminal in 1965, Long Wharf is embarking on a major new phase of its total reformation, following the 2018 firing of longtime artistic director Gordon Edelstein and the 2019 debut of a new artistic and managerial team under the leadership of Jacob G. Padrón, who is also founder and Artistic Director of The Sol Project, a national theatre initiative that is dedicated to producing the work of Latiné artists in New York City and beyond.

I thank and salute *NETIR*'s reviewers/critics/investigative reporters, who avidly have followed and generously shared the tumultuous adventures of their theatres with insight, compassion, and engaging prose: Stephen Kuehler at A.R.T.; Steve Otfinoski at both Barrington Stage and Shakespeare & Co.; David Ledoux at The Gamm; Jan Mason at Hartford Stage; our newest writer, Paul Fallon, at The Huntington; Karl Ruling at Long Wharf; Megan Grumbling at Portland Stage; Chris Hoyt at Trinity Rep; Angie Sweigart-Gallagher at Vermont Stage; and yours truly covering Yale Rep. I expect to entitle next year's introductory essay, *NETIR* Post-COVID. Here's hoping!

I invite your comments, questions, and recommendations; please feel free to contact me: mlomonaco@fairfield.edu.



AMERICAN REPERTORY THEATER

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, 2021-2022

Chasing Magic Ayodele Casel (25 Sept.–9 Oct.)

Macbeth in Stride Whitney White (23 Oct.–14 Nov.)

Phoenix Rising Rhiannon Giddens and the Silkroad Ensemble (19-21 Nov.)

WILD: A Musical Becoming V (Eve Ensler) (book and lyrics), Justin Tranter, Caroline Pennell, and Eren Cannata (music and lyrics) (5-20 Dec.)

Ocean Filibuster Lisa D'Amour (text), Sxip Shirey (music) (24 Feb.–13 Mar.)

1776 Sherman Edwards (music and lyrics), Peter Stone (book) (17 May–24 July)

For eighteen months after COVID-19 cut short its season in March 2020, the American Repertory Theater presented several shows via streaming video and re-examined its mission and culture in light of the clamor for anti-racist reforms following the murders of George Floyd and other Black Americans. The A.R.T. also created new health policies that were ready to go when it restarted in-person performances in September 2021: all audience members



Ayodele Casel and John Manzari in *Chasing Magic*. PHOTO: LIZA VOLL.

were required to wear masks and show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test, and the Theater adopted new cleaning and ventilation measures.

Two points of the company's reworked mission statement—making anti-racist practices habitual and promoting “the health and vitality of our planet”—were especially evident in the programming of the 2021-22 season. It opened with *Chasing Magic*, an appealing suite of dances by Black tap virtuoso Ayodele Casel, with an ensemble of dancers and musicians. The music ranged from Afro-Latin jazz to standards such as “Cheek to Cheek.” The performers seemed to revel in the return to live performance as much as the audience. Although *Chasing Magic* had been conceived as a live concert at Joe's Pub in New York, it had never been performed in person until it opened at the A.R.T.

Next came a show postponed by COVID in 2020, *Macbeth in Stride*, by Black singer and songwriter Whitney White. Her feminist adaptation of *Macbeth* calls for “reclaiming” Shakespeare's female characters from the insignificance that, as she sees it, his plays and the theatrical tradition have imposed upon them. The show, a condensed musical version of *Macbeth* from Lady Macbeth's point of view, emphasizes her scenes of power, initiative, and control, while depicting Macbeth as an ineffectual figure who takes his cues from her and then takes all the credit. Fragments of Shakespeare's text are interspersed with complaints about the treatment of the character of Lady Macbeth as an example of the oppression of women (and people of color, and queer people, and all who are “othered”) in Western society. But these criticisms, and the conception of Lady Macbeth as a symbol of the marginalized, are unpersuasive, because Shakespeare *doesn't* present Lady Macbeth as insignificant or unimportant. In Ms. White's version, Macbeth comments to his wife: “You don't want to be the king; you just want to be the *lead*.” His insight seems to sum up White's thesis: Shakespeare should have called his play *Lady Macbeth*, and his failure to do so is just an example of the age-old oppression of women by men. Ms. White had a strong singing voice, and her use of the three witches as commentators and cheerleaders for Lady Macbeth's ascent was interesting. But the rock-pop music is as banal as the script's retreading of reflexive feminist grievances.

Following the run of *Macbeth in Stride*, musician and singer Rhiannon Giddens brought the Silkroad Ensemble to the A.R.T.'s stage for a three-night engagement in a program titled *Phoenix Rising*. (Press invitations were

limited, though, and this writer did not attend.) The sixteen-member Ensemble, part of the Silkroad global arts collective, played original compositions on instruments from many countries and traditions, devoted to the theme of a hoped-for rebirth from the devastation of COVID-19.

Although the pandemic seemed to have receded sufficiently for audiences to gather in person again, it was not finished disrupting theater companies' schedules. When the Omicron variant of COVID appeared, some vaccinated company members of the A.R.T.'s next show, *WILD: A Musical Becoming*, were stricken with the virus, and the last two weeks of the run were cancelled before this writer had a chance to see it. The teenage characters in this concert musical, which starred Idina Menzel, may have had super-powers for fighting climate change, but they couldn't tame the Omicron wave.

However, the surge subsided in time for another piece with an environmental theme, *Ocean Filibuster*, to bring audiences back to the theatre in March. The show's conceit was that a world-governing body in the near future proposes to solve the problem of sea-level rise by filling much of the Ocean with land. The Ocean arrives to speak in its own defense, explaining the causes of climate change and the centrality of the Ocean in maintaining all life on earth. Although it was timely and grandly designed, with superb projections by Tal Yarden, *Ocean Filibuster* lost energy and focus by trying to be three things at once: political satire, science lesson, and poetic soliloquy.

The A.R.T.'s season closed with another holdover from 2020: a revival of *1776*, co-produced with the Roundabout Theatre Company of New York. With the Founding Fathers and Wives played by an all-female cast of various races and sexualities, the show implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) confronts the question of what the ideals of the early American republic might mean for the multiracial, polysexual country that America has become. The ensemble was excellent, with especially strong performances by Crystal Lucas-Perry as John Adams, Patrena Murray as Benjamin Franklin, Joanna Glushak as John Dickinson, Liz Mikel as John Hancock, and Allyson Kaye Daniel as Abigail Adams. Orchestrator John Clancy gave Sherman Edwards's score a rock-styled dressing which, for the most part, enhanced the songs and didn't clash with them. Co-directors Diane Paulus and Jeffrey L. Page occasionally indulged a penchant for going big, turning two songs that are inherently powerful—"Momma Look Sharp" and "Molasses, Rum, and Slaves"—into showstoppers whether they needed it or not, with full-ensemble backup singing and illustrative choreography. For the most part,

though, the directors let *1776* be the chamber musical that it is, with a modestly scaled set by Scott Pask (all the better for a big reveal at the last minute) and sparing use of projections designed by David Bengali. His most effective video work was a montage of the history of people of color in the United States, projected as John Adams sang “Is Anybody There?” The images powerfully conveyed Adams’s vision of “all Americans free for evermore.”

The revival of *1776* had originally been timed to play in Cambridge, tour the nation, and open on Broadway during the Presidential election battle of 2020. At this writing, the Edwards/Stone musical is scheduled to open for previews in New York in September 2022 and run into the New Year. Barring unforeseen complications of COVID-19, live audiences will witness, on stage, debates about the meaning of the American nation as heated and as relevant as any that are held during the midterm Congressional elections.

STEPHEN KUEHLER
Harvard University

BARRINGTON STAGE
PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, 2021

Who Could Ask for Anything More? The Songs of George Gershwin George Gershwin,

Ira Gershwin (6 June-30 July)

Chester Bailey Joseph Dougherty (18 June-7 July)

Eleanor Mark St. Germain (16 July-1 Aug.)

Boca Jessica Provenz (30 July-22 Aug.)

Sister Sorry Alec Wilkinson (12-29 Aug.)

A Crossing Mark St. Germain, Zoe Sarnak (23 Sept.-16 Oct.)

Few theatre companies in New England were better prepared to face the pandemic head on last season than Barrington Stage (see *NETJ 2021* for details). But due to a shutdown by the state of Massachusetts, it never got the chance to perform indoors. The two live productions took place outdoors, a block from the St. Germain Stage, while the annual 10 x 10 Play Festival was filmed on the Boyd-Quinson Stage and then shown streaming.

This season BSC was back at the Boyd-Quinson (the St. Germain remained closed), initially reducing its 520 seats to 160, making plenty of room for social distancing with masking and proof of vaccination required. Four



A trio of desperate illegal immigrants make their way over the Mexican-US border in *A Crossing*. PHOTO: DANIEL RADER

productions took place on the Main Stage and another two outdoors, including the opener, a musical revue of the songs of George Gershwin entitled *Who Could Ask for Anything More?* The versatile cast of five, backed by a five-piece band, performed more than two dozen Gershwin songs, both well-known and little-heard gems, in a tight seventy-five minutes.

The season indoors got off to a bang with a two-character drama, *Chester Bailey*. Set in a bleak Long Island mental hospital in 1945, it's the tale of the title character, a young man who escaped the hazards of World War II by landing a job in a shipyard factory, only to be attacked by a co-worker who left him blind, handless, and disfigured. The cruel violence visited on Chester, both before he entered the hospital and after, is all the more shocking in the clinical way it is described by the middle-aged Dr. Cotton, who becomes Chester's caretaker. Cotton, played with understated emotion by Reed Birney, has his own challenges, working in a corrupt medical system while conducting an affair with his venal boss's wife. Birney's real-life son Ephraim brought heartbreaking verisimilitude to Chester without the use of prosthetics. For nearly the first half of the show's ninety intermission-less minutes, doctor and patient barely exchange dialogue, but unwind their stories in brief, succinct monologues. Sensitively directed by Ron Lagomarsino, it was a beautiful production of a singular play.

Another two-hander that dealt with violence and redemption was *Sister Sorry*. This world premiere by Alec Wilkinson is based on an article he wrote in *The New Yorker*. The title character provides “secular confessional” to desperate people via an answering machine and two telephones. A reformed shoplifter, Sister Sorry knows something about dark secrets and we heard a compelling montage of callers spilling their souls out in David Budries’s sound design. The one confessor we meet is Jack Flash (Christopher Sears), a 28-year-old lost soul who claims to have murdered his nagging mother. Sister Sorry, played with intensity and a sharp intelligence by Jennifer Van Dyck, becomes obsessed with Jack and unwisely breaks her rule of directly speaking with him. The situation was filled with dramatic potential, little of which, unfortunately, is realized in the script. Sorry’s closing monologue, a confessional phone call of her own, is unconvincing. One wonders if the play needs a better construction in making its journey from journalistic essay to the stage.

It’s every actor’s dream to find a historical person to parlay into a long-running one-person show. In *Eleanor*, Harriet Harris has found hers in Eleanor Roosevelt. Harris seemed to be channeling Roosevelt, from her patrician accent to her unique combination of vulnerability and steely resilience. Playwright Mark St. Germain positions Eleanor’s ghost in the Rock Creek Cemetery where she revisits her eventful life, moving back and forth in time. The play touches on the highlights of her life, most compellingly her relationship with her long dead father, a man whose strengths and weaknesses were not so different from her husband’s and who she was more able to forgive. *Eleanor* is the perfect vehicle for a fine actor like Harris, who should take this show on the road.

Six spry elder actors find plumb roles of their own in *Boca*, a comedy about a gated retirement community in Boca Raton, Florida. The best of this mixed bag of twelve playlets are more character than plot driven. The two bench sketches that open and close the show were ably played by Robert Zukerman, as a crusty former Brooklynite, and Kenneth Tigar, as a more upbeat Jewish retiree who peppers his sunny conversation with lines from pop songs. Other playlets balance this sunniness with a darker despair that sharpen the comedy, as when two women, wonderfully played by April Ortiz and BSC veteran Debra Jo Rupp, flee their boring lives for greener pastures. They go as far as Key West before deciding to forgo their *Thelma and Louise* moment and return home. Another edgy comic highlight had a character, played by

the delicious Peggy Pharr Wilson, make her play for a recently widowed man (Tigar) with a homemade lasagna and a loaded Glock.

BSC ended its season with another of its original musicals, one that couldn't be timelier. *A Crossing* chronicles a group of illegal Mexicans seeking a better life in the United States. While the story was by Mark St. Germain, it was told entirely through music and dance with no spoken dialogue. While the immigrants are led across the border by a wily Coyote (Omar Nieves), the audience has two guiding narrators, Sol and Luna, powerfully played and sung by Andres Quintero and Monica Tulia Ramirez. The electrifying dance numbers were co-choreographed by director Joshua Bergasse and Alberto Lopez and included a celebratory dance in a rainstorm, simulated with light and sound, and a dangerous Rio Grande crossing with inundating fabric representing the violent river waters trapping and drowning one victim. The musical score is a mix of original numbers by Zoe Sarnak and traditional Mexican folk songs arranged by George Saenz that lent a compelling authenticity to the production. Although the journey ends in a shocking scene of governmental violence, it includes a surprising reminder that we all came here as immigrants, something too many of us forget.

In November Julianne Boyd announced that she will be retiring at the end of the 2022 season, having served as the company's co-founder and artistic director for twenty-seven years. The search is on for a new artistic director for BSC.

STEVEN OTFINOSKI
Fairfield University

THE SANDRA FEINSTEIN-GAMM THEATRE (THE GAMM)

WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND, 2021-22

A Lie Agreed Upon Tony Estrella (30 Sept.-24 Oct.)

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play Joe Landry (26 Nov.-24 Dec.)

An Octoroon Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (27 Jan.-20 Feb.)

Ironbound Martyna Majok (17 Mar.-10 Apr.)

A Midsummer Night's Dream William Shakespeare (5 May-29 May.)

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre (The Gamm) delivered on its goal to present five in-person productions for the 37th season, despite the various surges of the pandemic. An online series of interviews about Shakespeare



Marc Pierre in *An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. PHOTO: CAT LAINE.

called *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*, an online staged reading of a new play, *A Lie Agreed Upon*, and the work of the education department was the extent of programming during the 2020-21 season. Moving back to in-person productions, The Gamm was diligent about checking vaccination status and enforcing masks for all patrons. Though audience sizes were noticeably smaller than pre-COVID, the appreciation for being back in the theatre was palpable among everyone in attendance.

The first play of the season was *A Lie Agreed Upon*, a new version of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, written and directed by Tony Estrella. In the play, Dr. Thomas Stockman (Sean McConaghy) discovers that Springfield, U.S.A.'s, soon-to-be-opened hot springs is contaminated and dangerous to the public. The hot springs poses a major economic boon to the town and therefore the mayor and Stockman's brother, Peter Stockman (Jonathan Higginbotham), want the spa to open as planned. What follows is a play that poses a heated debate about how in a democracy the tyranny of public opinion can sometimes be at odds with the small voice of an individual backed by scientific evidence. While the play was successful in presenting an all-too-familiar debate, it didn't raise any new questions or provide any new insights that we haven't been exposed to over the last several years. The play has potential, but it could benefit from more of a development process once the "fog of war" has cleared a bit from our current situation.

Taking a step back from social commentary and the troubles of our time, The Gamm presented the traditional holiday production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry. After a year of lockdown, the familiar radio station set, DJ Potter's Foley sound effects, the festive carols around the piano, the holiday wishes written down by audience members and read by the cast throughout the production, and a classic story about the impact one life has on others was a welcome and healing celebration.

For the new year, The Gamm started strong with a disturbing and theatrically stunning production of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon*, directed by Joe Wilson, Jr. Upon arriving at the theatre, the audience was directed to enter the space, not through the normal front doors to the lobby, but through the stage door. Michael McGarty's scenic design completely transformed the space. The seats that The Gamm traditionally uses for the audience were left empty while large balls of cotton replaced the spectators that normally inhabit them, suggesting the field of the plantation. The audience sat where the playing space normally is, on either side of a raised stage. This choice

placed the audience in the world of the play in a way that implicated everyone: we were all participants and witnesses of this very American tragedy. The play is based on the 1859 melodrama, *The Octoroon*, by Dion Boucicault and Jenkins employs a play-within-a-play structure, exposing the inherent manipulation in the genre. George (Marc Pierre), the white heir to the Terrebonne Plantation, falls in love with Zoe (Shelley Fort), the octoroon or one-eighth black woman, who the evil M'Closky (Marc Pierre) plots to steal as property when the plantation goes up for sale. Marc Pierre gave a wonderful performance playing protagonist (George), antagonist (M'Closky), and playwright himself (BJJ, or Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins). Jeff Church played a great foil to BJJ as the original playwright, Boucicault, as well as a Native American and auctioneer. Shelley Fort as Zoe and Jackie Davis's performance as Dido, a house slave, were also excellent.

Before we could catch our breath, we were off to Newark, New Jersey, to spend an evening in a terrifyingly desolate bus station. Martyna Majok's *Ironbound* takes us through the struggles of Darja, a Polish immigrant trying to survive in America. Another deeply troubling play, this production confronted us with domestic violence, substance abuse, and the horrors that many female immigrants have to suffer when they find themselves at the bottom of an unforgiving economic system. Played with deep commitment and electric presence, Donnla Hughes's Darja took the audience through the character's complicated and emotionally trying journey, spanning two decades without ever leaving the same bus stop. There were also strong performances by Steve Kidd, Gunnar Manchester, and Rodney Witherspoon II. Rachel Walshe's direction was nuanced and engaging, with clear storytelling stemming from thoroughly specific work with the actors.

The final production of the season was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Fred Sullivan Jr. The beautiful scenic design by Patrick Lynch was striking upon entering the theatre. With paper lanterns, raised platforms, a ramp, and a Grecian emblem flagging our location very clearly, the set seemed to promise a magical playground for the actors. The costumes by Jessie Darrell Jarbadan confirmed that we were in ancient Greece, refreshingly true to the text of the play. Nora Eschenheimer was a standout as Helena, and Tony Estrella joined the cast playing Bottom. The production had some pushed acting and lots of ideas that didn't quite come together in the end, but it's always a treat to enter the world of this play.

In a press release announcing next season, Estrella says, "Season 38 takes

off like a rocket with two plays attempting to make sense of an upside down world. We'll look at the making of a modern day tyranny in Eastern Europe, and the consequences of racial and class divides at home. In the new year we'll push theatrical boundaries with storytelling that connects our past, our present, and a precarious yet undetermined future." The lineup of plays is: *Describe the Night* by Rajiv Joseph, *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage, *Faith Healer* by Brian Friel, *Let the Right One In* by Jack Thorne, and *The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood. This will also include the holiday tradition, *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* Joe Landry for a limited run in December.

DAVID LEDOUX

Bristol Community College

HARTFORD STAGE

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, 2021-2022

Ah, Wilderness! by Eugene O'Neill (14 Oct. – 7 Nov.)

It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play adapted by Joe Landry (26 Nov. – 26 Dec.)

Angry, Raucus and Shamelessly Gorgeous by Pearl Cleage (13 Jan. – 6 Feb.)

Dishwasher Dreams by Alaudin Ullah (24 Feb. – 20 Mar.)

Lost in Yonkers by Neil Simon (7 Apr – 1 May)

Kiss My Aztec! Book by John Leguizamo and Tony Taccone, Music by Benjamin Velez,
Lyrics by David Kamp (June 1 – 26)

Last year, due to safety concerns around the pandemic, Hartford Stage canceled a six-play season. Its reduced offerings in 2020-21 included conversations with Artistic Director Melia Bensussen and guest artists offered on Zoom that were free and open to the public, and a virtual "*Community Carol*" presented as a livestream and made available on-demand through the holiday season. It also livestreamed readings of three new works in its "American Voices New Play Festival" presented on Zoom in June. By contrast, in 2021-22, Hartford Stage succeeded in presenting a full season of live performance in the theatre.

Hartford Stage maintained strict COVID-19 policies throughout the season. Although the theatre did not utilize socially-distanced seating, staff checked vaccination cards at the door, only admitting patrons with proof of vaccination. It also maintained a strict masking policy, which patrons dutifully followed. Beginning in June with the production of *Kiss My Aztec!*, it



Krystina Alabado (foreground) and Angelica Beliard (background) from *Kiss My Aztec!*.

PHOTO: T. CHARLES ERICKSON.

relaxed the policies—it no longer checked vaccination status, and masks were “welcomed and encouraged but not required.” For patrons who preferred the stricter policy, Hartford Stage offered five performances that mandated masks with vaccination cards checked at the door.

It was thrilling and touching to be back in the theatre together. The return to communal experience brought to mind Ayad Akhtar’s 2017 article in the *New York Times* in which he wrote, “. . . watching live theatre can synchronize the heartbeats of an audience.”¹ The audience was clearly excited to be there, and they cheered when cast members of the season-opener *Ah, Wilderness!* removed dust-covers from the furniture at the top of the show in a nod to the season’s “raise the curtain” theme of returning to live performance.

In 2020, in response to the Black Lives Matter and WSYWAT (We See You White American Theatre) movements that followed the despicable murder of George Floyd, most American theatres put out statements of commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Today, in many cases, these important documents can be difficult to locate. This is happily not the case with Hartford Stage, where the homepage includes the banner headline “Re-Emerging with Intention” highlighting the company’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It states in part, “. . . this is the time to be bold and hold ourselves accountable to lead with greater consciousness, empathy, and to give voice to all those who have not have the privilege, access, or opportunity to do so. Words matter. Actions speak louder.” This banner links to a company statement with enumerated goals for its “On-going Equity and Anti-Racism Commitments, Practices and Actions” that is “Reviewed quarterly by members of the Senior Team.” This active stance is impressive, as is the commitment to regularly review and revise the policies. The 2021-22 season made good on this commitment.

A few old chestnuts contrasted several contemporary works presented this season. Neil Simon’s *Lost in Yonkers* stood out for the whiteness of its cast, among the rest of the productions with either BIPOC characters or multi-cultural casting. Marsha Mason co-directed, and delighted audience members in the role of Grandma Kurnitz. The production included standout performances by Gabriel Amoroso as Arty and Michael Nathanson as Louie.

Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah Wilderness!*, directed by Artistic Director Melia Bensussen, included some touching moments. Music Director Yan Li was on stage on piano, providing nice musical arrangements throughout the show,

and the spare, effective set—a wooden frame of the Miller home—was designed by James Noone.

Joe Landry's adaptation of *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, co-directed by Bensussen and Artistic Producer Rachel Alderman, was presented as a downsized holiday offering in place of the traditional production of *A Christmas Carol*, in order to keep the cast size small due to concerns around COVID-19.

Pearl Cleage's ensemble comedy *Angry, Raucus & Shamelessly Gorgeous*, directed by Susan V. Booth, was a crowd-pleaser and included strong, enjoyable performances by Cynthia D. Barker as Kate, Terry Burrell as Anna, Shakirah DeMesier as Pete, and Marva Hicks as Betty.

Playwright-performer Aludin Ullah's tour-de-force *Dishwasher Dreams*, directed by Chay Yew, told the funny and poignant story of one man's American Dream. The demanding solo performance called to mind the early work of John Leguizamo, and the production was a workout that seemed at times to challenge Ullah both physically—with non-stop movement throughout the show—as well as mentally, as he sometimes haltingly wove many different threads into the tapestry of his story. Acclaimed percussionist Avirodh Sharma underscored the ambitious production with original tabla music that provided an exciting element to the show.

Hartford Stage ended the season with the pre-Broadway run of the irreverent new musical comedy *Kiss My Aztec!* created by a team led by John Leguizamo. Audiences loved the musical that included several catchy numbers including the uplifting finale, "*Dia de los Vivos*." Pre-pandemic, Leguizamo wrote and starred in *Latin American History for Morons*, a signature one-man-show that had more teeth and ultimately more heart than *Aztec!* For that reason, while *Aztec!* was enjoyable, it was somewhat disappointing in relation to Leguizamo's oeuvre.

In April, Hartford Stage announced that it would bring director Christopher D. Betts into the company on a two-year fellowship funded by the Joyce C. Willis Fund for Excellence and Equity in the Arts. Hartford Stage was one of three Connecticut organizations that were recipients of this grant, which is touted as a "visionary initiative to support Black artists." Betts, a graduate of NYU and most recently Yale, is scheduled to direct productions and lead community programs during his tenure. This fellowship underlines the theatre's commitment to fostering a variety of voices as they forge ahead into the future.

Plans for the 2022-23 season include Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*; *Espejos: Clean* by Christine Quintana; *The Art of Burning* by Kate Snodgrass; Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; *Trouble in Mind* by Alice Childress; and *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* adapted by Joe Landry.

JAN MASON

Western Connecticut State University

THE HUNTINGTON

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 2021-22

Hurricane Diane Madeleine George (27 Aug.-26 Sept. in person production for all)

The Witch Jen Silverman (15 Oct.-14 Nov. in person production for all)

Teenage Dick Mike Lew (3 Dec.-9 Jan. in person production for all)

The Bluest Eye Novel by Toni Morrison, adapted by Lydia R. Diamond (28 Jan.-26 Mar. in person production for all, digital performance on-demand through 9 Apr.)

What the Constitution Means to Me Heidi Schreck (22 Feb.-20 Mar. in person production for all)

Our Daughters, Like Pillars Kirsten Greenidge (8 Apr.-8 May in person production for all, digital performance on-demand through 22 May)

Common Ground Revisited Melia Bensussen and Kirsten Greenidge (27 May-26 June in person production for all, digital performance through 17 July)

The past two pandemic years have provided both individuals and institutions the opportunity to retrench, reassess, and regroup. Since The Huntington Theatre Company was founded forty seasons ago, it has presented over 250 plays—from revered chestnuts to new works—to become the leading professional company in Boston. When COVID-19 hit, the 2020 the season abruptly ended, and several other challenges rose. By end of 2020, over half the staff was furloughed or laid off, and longtime Artistic Director Peter DeBois resigned under public accusations concerning transparency, diversity, and a hostile work environment. The 2020-2021 season included only two virtual plays, while the company focused on addressing internal traumas. It pledged to create a more respectful work environment and strengthened its commitment to creating theatre of equality and diversity.

This introspection is reflected in a quiet rebranding. “Huntington Theatre Company” is now a historical term, and the diagonal boldface logo used in



The Bluest Eye by Lydia R. Diamond PHOTO : T CHARLES ERICKSON.

years past has been supplanted by a simple, symmetrical heading: “The Huntington.”

The 2021-2022 season illustrated how this reassessed and regrouped Huntington relaunched. Not with the accelerating thrust of a rocket. Rather like a grand ship, dry dock refurbished, seeking steady keel and smooth rudder in fresh waters. With its main theatre under renovation, and no Artistic Director, The Huntington’s season was more modest than in the past. However, longtime Managing Director Michael Maso put forth a collection of live productions in the Wimberly Theatre at the Calderwood Pavilion that reflected The Huntington’s changed focus. Seven plays that span a wide swath of history and social commentary: all by female, BIPOC or gay playwrights; over half directed by females; replete with non-traditional and BIPOC casts. Yet, this season’s selections still reflect The Huntington’s precedents of creating contemporary theatre rooted in classic precedent.

First up: Greek Mythology. The season kicked off, as September often does, with a hurricane. *Hurricane Diane* visits a suburban New Jersey cul-de-sac where the memory of Hurricane Sandy is still fresh. The Greek God Dionysus, in the form of a butch gardener, seduces four housewives to replace their monoculture lawns with restorative landscapes. The ethos of environmental resilience creates gardens tangled with lust and liberation. Never has the catastrophe of climate change been so funny.

Next: Jacobean Drama. *The Witch* is a contemporary play (written in 2018). However, it is set in an undetermined, yet period, locale that evokes its seventeenth century source material, *The Witch of Edmonton*.

Of course: there’s Shakespeare. *Teenage Dick* re-envision *Richard III* in present-day Roseland High School, where the roguery required to be elected student council president is frightfully similar to gaining a crown. *Teenage Dick* is Mike Lew’s second play produced by The Huntington (*Tiger Style!* 2016). A special shoutout to actor Shannon DeVido for her hilarious portrayal of a wheelchaired high schooler who yields no ground to any walking creature.

And Nobel Prize winning literature. *The Bluest Eye*, previously cancelled due to the pandemic, finally had its opportunity to shine. The ensemble staging—the entire cast remained on-view throughout show—was remarkable. However, the most memorable aspect of the play is the reverence playwright Lydia R. Diamond bestows upon Toni Morrison’s beautiful prose. Entire

passages were recited verbatim, as the audience sat, captivated, and allowed the trauma and glory to flow over and among us.

The season included an historically important document: the Boston-stop of Heidi Schreck's award-winning play, *What the Constitution Means to Me*, performed at the Emerson Majestic Theater, rather than Wimberly Theatre. The touring production is virtually identical to the original, including the same bland VFW Hall set, with Cassie Beck in the lead role and Boston-area high school students participating in the debate-off finale. What's not identical is the impact this play has on the audience. When *What the Constitution Means to Me* premiered in 2017, it cloaked important questions about equality and access to power under the guise of a patriotic exercise. A mere five years later, after a disputed election, a Capitol insurrection, and a Supreme Court casual with precedent, the play's critique of our nation's most sacred document explodes beyond the fourth wall and confirms our current angst that we're living in perilous times, while the steady rudder we've relied on for so long—our Constitution—is neither as generous nor as balanced as we supposed.

A fresh playwright wrote in epic form. The Huntington has a long association with Boston playwright Kirsten Greenidge. Kirsten was a Huntington Playwright Fellow from 2007 to 2009, and two of her previous plays, *Luck of the Irish* (2012) and *Milk Like Sugar* (2016), enjoyed main stage productions. This season included the world premiere of *Our Daughters Like Pillars*, a three-hour epic of a family on vacation. What resonated most was how this play by a Black woman about a Black family highlighted familial commonalities, rather than differences. Minor script changes could render the Shaw family as white, Hispanic, or Asian. In an era where identities divide as often as they unite, it was refreshing to see color rendered in service to a broader, human, identity.

Season's end was based on one of the most influential books of our time. *Common Ground* is J. Anthony Lukas's Pulitzer Prize winning book about three families during the 1970's Boston busing crisis. *Common Ground Revisited* is a twelve-person ensemble, playing dozens of characters: sometimes the actors themselves. The play weaves a dialogue-dense portrayal of politics and history. As someone who lived through Boston's busing, I appreciated the depth of research, though I yearned for deeper empathy toward each family portrayed, who are so beautifully rendered in Mr. Lukas's book.

Beyond its production season, The Huntington continues to meet internal

difficulties in substantive and public ways. The Anti-Racist Strategic Action Plan (ASAP) addresses The Huntington's internal and external commitment to systematic change. It is implemented by The Huntington Anti-Racism and Equity (HEAR) Task Force, which regularly updates progress—and challenges—on The Huntington website.

Commencing July 2022, Loretta Greco will become Artistic Director. The renovated Huntington Theatre is scheduled to open in October 2022. The opening production is, fittingly, a revival of August Wilson's, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the first of many Wilson plays produced at The Huntington. The rest of the 2022-23 season admirably reflects The Huntington's desire to be relevant, aware, and equitable while still being: The Huntington.

PAUL E. FALLON

Cambridge, Massachusetts

LONG WHARF THEATRE

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, 2021-22

The Chinese Lady Lloyd Suh (12 Oct – 31 Oct)

Fires In The Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities Anna Deavere Smith
(18 Jan – 6 Feb)

Dream Hou\$e Eliana Pipes (15 Mar – 3 Apr)

Queen Madhuri Shekar (17 May – 5 Jun)

Long Wharf returned to in-person performance on the Claire Tow Stage for the 2021-22 season, presenting four shows and working as “a gathering place for storytelling that amplifies lived experiences and celebrates our kaleidoscopic world,” to quote the Long Wharf website's homepage.

The season started with *The Chinese Lady*, the show that was in dress rehearsals when COVID stopped the 2020 season. It's a two-character drama based on the true story of Afong Moy, a woman brought from China to America in 1834 to work as a side-show entertainer, “The Chinese Lady.” She was a curiosity. Chinese women in the US were rare, and she had tiny, bound feet. Her performances were mundane activities: walking, using chopsticks, making tea. She toured the United States, was covered in the press, met President Andrew Jackson, then disappeared from history. However, the play is not a history lesson: it's an examination of how we define ourselves and whom we see as “the other.” Shannon Tyo gave a strong performance as



Shannon Tyo as Afong Moy in *The Chinese Lady* PHOTO: T. CHARLES ERICKSON

Afong, repetitively showing bits of Chinese life to American audiences, sprinkled with comments on American history (e.g., the slave trade, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and American customs (isn't eating with a fork violent and easy?). Afong's translator, Atung, played by Jon Norman Schneider, in a monologue offers an investigation of "otherness," performing the self, and the gaze in two directions—the audience gazing at the performer and the performer gazing at the audience. The scenic design by Junghyun Georgia Lee was a brilliant metaphor for Afong's story. As the audience entered, a large modern shipping container was on stage, clearly marked as a shipment from China. It opened and Afong's performance stage slid forward. Present and past: direct from China!

Fires In The Mirror is a piece devised by Anna Deavere Smith from interviews she conducted with people around Crown Heights, Brooklyn, after the riots in 1991. It offers twenty-six characters giving twenty-nine monologues—verbatim theatre extracted from those interviews—all performed by the playwright in its original run at The Public Theater. The presentation then was spare: the actor in white shirt and black pants, a few costume and hand props, black and white projected images, with occasional recorded music. The Long Wharf production—directed by Nicole Brewer with scenery by Diggee, costumes by Mika Eubanks, projections by Camilla Tassi, and sound design and music by UptownWorks—blew up the production. It gave the actor, Cloteal L. Horne, sand pits strewn with what looked like African storage baskets in which to work, in front of pretty but hard to read projected images. Props were hidden in multiple places and buried under the sand. In an added prologue, Horne told us what the show was about and asked permission of "the elders" to perform it. In a post-show coda, Horne invited audience members to stand, take a cleansing breath, and recite the mantra, "We deserve a better world."

Dream House was presented last season as Zoom theatre—good then, but much better on stage. The story is about Latiné sisters Patricia and Julia Castillo who have come together to sell their childhood home now that their mother has died, with hopes of starting new lives with the proceeds. To gin up the sale, the sisters sign a contract with a television reality show, "Flip It and List It." The TV show's producers will renovate the house to maximize its sale price, modernizing it for today's buyers. The show is easily seen as an exploration of gentrification, cultural identity, sibling rivalry, and commercialism, but *Dream* also questions what we know as reality. The sisters have

stories about who built the family home; an uglier story comes from the TV production team's research. As the show progressed, the home's walls bled. (The scenic design was by Stephanie Osin Cohen with projections by Mark Holthusen.) The TV show's host buys a dress off the sister wearing it, then offers money for her teeth. You might covet a dream house, dream dress, or dream smile, but what's the dream?

Queen centers around two female PhD students who are researching honeybee Colony Collapse Disorder, trying to tie it to Monsanto's pesticides. The in-the-round setting, designed by Junghyun Georgia Lee, was trapezoidal tables on casters, pushed together to make a hexagon or pulled apart to create an interior space, supplemented with minimal props. One graduate student, Sanam Shah, is a statistician; the other, Ariel Spiegel, is from a family of bee-keepers. Adding to the mix are the white faculty advisor and a South Asian Wall Street trader, whom Shah meets on a blind date set up by her parents. It's a clash between faculty and students, Indian and American culture, female aspirations and male expectations. Aneesha Kudtarkar's production moved swiftly and clearly; the statistics did not obscure the stakes for the characters.

The Long Wharf Theatre Board of Directors addressed the *Queen* audience before the May 19 show, announcing that Long Wharf Theatre would be leaving its 57-year home to become an itinerant theatre in the New Haven community, and the Board's support for Long Wharf's staff in reaching this decision. Long Wharf's vision is of a "theatre for everyone;" the current location at 222 Sargent Drive is difficult to access for people who do not drive. Furthermore, the venue is expensive, leading to recurring deficits, and, remarkably, has always been a rental property, despite costly renovations paid for by the theatre over the years. Long Wharf Theatre needs a sustainable business model, which is impossible at the venue in the New Haven Food Terminal.

Long Wharf Theatre's lease runs through the Fall of 2022, allowing a few more in-person shows on Sargent Drive, including a concert reading of *Jelly's Last Jam*; *Dignity, Always Dignity*, a work-in-process; and *Home(coming): A Community Parade*. The rest of the 2022-23 season is evolving. The Long Wharf Theatre website's "Our Path Forward" page will offer more information as it becomes available.

KARL G. RULING
Bridgeport, Connecticut

PORTLAND STAGE COMPANY

PORTLAND, MAINE, 2021-22

Searching for Mr. Moon Richard Topol and Willy Holtzman (3 Nov.-21 Nov. in person; 17 Nov.-5 Dec. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Perseverance Callie Kimball (29 Sept.-17 Oct. in person; 13 Oct.-31 Oct. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens (In person performances cancelled; 18 Dec.-4 Jan. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Senior Living Tor Hyams & Lisa St. Lou (26 Jan.-13 Feb. in person; 9 Feb.-27 Feb. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Last Ship to Proxima Centauri Greg Lam (2 Mar.-20 Mar. in person; 16 Mar.-3 Apr. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

I and You Lauren Gunderson (30 Mar.-17 Apr. in person; 13 Apr.-1 May pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Sabina Willy Holtzman; Music and Lyrics Louise Beach and Darrah Cloud. (4 May-22 May in person; 19 May-Jun. 5 pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Smoke on the Mountain Connie Ray; conceived by Alan Bailey; musical arrangements by Mike Craver and Mark Hardwick. Co-produced with Maine State Music Theatre (2 Aug.-28 Aug. in person; 17 Aug.-11 Sept. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

While almost all *NETIR* theatres were shuttered, Portland Stage had a robust 2020-21 pandemic season that was financially solvent and busy with the help of the Paycheck Protection Program. The theatre installed a new HVAC system and was granted Actors' Equity permission to reopen for live theatre. Safety measures included weekly COVID tests for casts and crews, masks and proof of vaccine mandates to attend performances, asynchronous online viewing options, and last season's line-up of plays exclusively with running times of under two hours and no more than three actors.

The company's 2021-22 season continued dual in-person and digital viewing options, with masks and proof of vaccination required for live attendance. The season opened with the world premiere of another one-man show: *Searching for Mr. Moon*, written by Richard Topol and Willy Holtzman. In this multimedia production, stage and television actor Rich Topol—playing himself—explored the loss of his father, his gaining of a father-in-law in experimental composer Lukas Foss, and his own fears of



Kennedy Kanagawa and Jamal James in *Last Ship to Proxima Centauri* PHOTO: MICAL HUTSON.

fatherhood. Under the direction of Julia Gibson, Topol played multiple characters with great compassion, and frequently shifting visual projections provided Abstract Expressionist-style companions for Foss's tangly, polyphonic music.

Another world premiere came in Maine playwright Callie Kimball's powerful *Perseverance*, commissioned for PSC by the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative and originally slated for the 2020 season. Kimball's exquisite script tells of two schoolteachers, one white and one Black, separated by 100 years. With characters from both timelines inhabiting the stage at once (through graceful blocking of director Jade King Carroll) this triumph of a show made manifest how the legacy of the past endures in the present.

For its holiday show, after a one-man *Christmas Carol* last year, PSC returned to a fuller-cast production—only to cancel live performances due to COVID incidents. The show instead streamed online as a pre-recording.

Its first show of 2022 was the world premiere of *Senior Living*, Tor Hyams' & Lisa St. Lou's gentle comedy of vignettes about aging, framed around a senior living facility's imminent talent show. Under the affectionate direction of Judith Ivey, the ensemble cast of five played close to twenty-five characters with generous, playful good humor.

Greg Lam's *Last Ship to Proxima Centauri*, a pointed sci-fi dark comedy and a PSC Clauder Competition winner, was set on a remarkably realistic spaceship. Two white Americans are piloting 100,000 other Americans (in suspended animation) along the final leg of a two-millennia voyage to their new home. When they finally get there, they expect a parade. Instead, they find people of color who are not thrilled to see them. Portland Stage amplified the upending of Euro-American centrism by staging much of the dialogue in Mandarin, Spanish, or Yoruba. *Last Ship* channeled its sci-fi hijinks to raise questions about race, immigration politics, colonialism, and the fluidity of the historical narrative.

The company's next show, *I and You*, was a two-hander by Lauren Gunderson about an ill high school student who finds an unlikely bond with a student sent to deliver her Walt Whitman assignment. Cait Robinson directed Pascal Arquimedes and Sarah Lord in a show billed as "an ode to youth, life, love, and the strange beauty of human connectedness."

The company's final regular-season mainstage production was a musical originally planned for a world premiere at PSC in 2020: *Sabina*, by Willy Holtzman with music by Louise Beach and lyrics by Darrah Cloud, a meditation on Sabina Spielrein—Carl Jung's patient, then lover, then accomplished psychiatric colleague. Under the direction of Danilo Gambini and Daniella Topol, with a live musical ensemble directed by Bradley Vieth, the show bridged comedic tropes and more lyric, dream-laced modes, and as Sabina, Stephanie Machado was luminous and irrepressible.

In PSC's Studio Theater, this spring saw PSC's 33rd annual *Little Festival of the Unexpected*, which featured live-streamed Zoom readings and discussions of Brendan Pelsue's *Riverbank*; Bess Welden's *Madeleines*; and *Sweet Goats & Blueberry Señoritas* by Maine poet Richard Blanco and Vanessa Garcia. And in June came the return of the "Too Strange to Live, Too Weird to Die" staged reading series, curated by PSC Literary Manager Todd Brian Backus, with Jiehae Park's *peerless*, Madeleine George's *The Zero Hour*, and Kate Benson's *A Beautiful Day in November on the Banks of the Greatest of the Great Lakes*.

This summer, PSC continues its recent tradition of co-producing a musical with Maine State Music Theatre; this year's offering is *Smoke on the Mountain*, a bluegrass jukebox show set at a Saturday Night Gospel Sing at a church in the Smoky Mountains of 1938.

Looking ahead, in June PSC made a major announcement: it now enters the public phase of its new "Making An Entrance Capital Campaign," with more than 75% already reached of a \$6.4 million goal. Funds will go toward increasing the institution's accessibility, visibility, and inclusivity within the community. Planned facility renovations include a state-of-the-art elevator, an enhanced lobby and patron gathering places, and a "spectacular marquee, a gateway to Portland's Arts District." Renovations are planned for the summer of 2023, with a grand reveal slated to open the fall 2023 season.

MEGAN GRUMBLING
Southern Maine Community College
University of New England

SHAKESPEARE & COMPANY

LENOX, MASSACHUSETTS, 2021

King Lear William Shakespeare (2 July – 28 Aug., in person production and on-line streaming)

Being Othello Debra Ann Byrd (16-25 July)

Art Yasmina Reza (30 July – 22 Aug.)

Measure for Measure William Shakespeare (Workshop Production, 1-5 Sept.)

hang Debbie Tucker Green (1 Sept. – 3 Oct.)

The Chairs Eugene Ionesco (8-31 Oct.)

After a dry COVID-19 season with no live productions, Shakespeare & Co. returned in 2021 with a full slate of live plays, albeit with standard viral precautions. Regulations, such as masks, were relaxed part way through the season for some of the four plays that were staged in two outdoor venues while both indoor productions at the Tina Packer Playhouse (*hang* and *The Chairs*) required vaccinations and masks for audiences and stage personnel alike.

Shakespeare & Co.'s newest outdoor stage, The New Spruce Theatre, was inaugurated with the season's first production, *King Lear*, originally scheduled for last season. This spacious 500-seat amphitheater is an intriguing blend of the human-made and natural worlds—a wide slab of a stage with spruce trees that appear to sprout magically from the very floorboards. Part of the company's long-term strategic plan, the new venue pays "homage to Greek amphitheatres and this company's history," according to Artistic Director Allyn Burrows, while also meeting the challenges of COVID. Unfortunately, at the evening performance this reviewer attended, the elements were as unkind to the players and audience as they were to Lear on the heath. Before the opening scene had concluded, the rains came and everyone adjourned indoors to the Tina Packer Playhouse. Christopher Lloyd, best known for his work in television and film, struggled valiantly as Lear, but he lacked the power and majesty of the misguided monarch, as well as the vocal stamina for Shakespeare's magnificent language. He did better in the latter scenes, bringing compelling pathos to the wiser, resigned Lear, as he helped Tom O'Bedlam (Edgar in disguise, a wonderfully kinetic Nomi SiDone) or grieved over the dead Cordelia. The large supporting cast was uniformly fine, led by veterans Jonathan Epstein as a stalwart Earl of Kent



Barbara Sims and Malcolm Ingram optimistically face an uncertain future in *The Chairs*. PHOTO: DANIEL RADER

and Nigel Gore as an upright but naïve Gloucester, who only sees the evil encircling him when it is too late. Other standouts were Bryce Michael Wood as a charmingly villainous Edmund, whose soliloquies crackled with wit and energy; MaConnia Chesser, a ruthless Goneril; and Allyn Burrows, a thoughtful Fool, whose silences were often as eloquent as his verbal jabs. While judiciously cut to under three hours, this was a full-bodied *Lear*, whose common goodness shone through all the bleak cruelty of nature and humankind, a hopeful missive for our own troubled times.

A more intimate portrait of a Shakespearean tragic hero was revealed in *Being Othello: A Black Girl's Journey*, written and performed by Debra Ann Byrd and staged in the Roman Garden Theatre, the other outdoor venue. Playing Othello in an all-female production provided the title for this multimedia monodrama, but Byrd also eloquently reviewed her early life growing up in Spanish Harlem. She relived such tribulations as a teenage pregnancy and the death of her father and finding solace in the world of the theatre.

The Roman Garden was also the setting for *Art*, whose self-absorbed, upscale characters are far removed from Byrd's world. Set designer Patrick Brennan cleverly moved the setting from an East Side Manhattan apart-

ment to an open-air deck/patio in the Berkshires. Serge (Michael F. Toomey) trotted out his \$200,000 art treasure, a pale white canvas, back and forth on the stage to find the perfect angle to best appreciate its beauty. The movements as much defined his character as anything he said. Friend Marc (“ranney”) was a bear of a man whose booming voice and derisive laughter at his friend’s purchase drove Serge to distraction. Lawrence L. James filled out this comic trio as Yvan, who has issues of his own with his impending wedding to his boss’s daughter. His long monologue about a wedding invitation bedeviled by two stepmothers deserved the spontaneous ovation it received at the performance this reviewer attended. In the end, Serge chooses friendship over art (sort of) and the friends end up sadder but a little wiser.

It took much of its ninety-minute running time to figure out what was going on in *hang*, a regional premiere and recent hit at London’s Royal Court Theatre. Two uniformed interrogators in a futuristic state did their best to make the woman they are interrogating comfortable in Patrick Brennan’s coldly sterile interrogation room. Kristin Wold as the leading interrogator tried her best to balance duty and empathy as did Ken Cheeseman as her bumbling, but well-intended partner. The woman’s anger and frustration were beautifully realized by Cloteal L. Horne in several powerful monologues. We understand that she or members of her family have been the victims of a horrendous crime, but what it is is never made explicit. What is clear is that the victim will determine the nature of the condemned man’s execution. For all the play’s portentousness and the theme of “social justice” that director Regge Life emphasized in the program note, the questions raised by the play remain frustratingly ambiguous. Is it a condemnation of capital punishment? Personal vengeance? Or something else? *hang* keeps its audience hanging on, waiting for a dramatic denouement that never comes.

The last production of the season was the rarely-performed one act *The Chairs* by one of the fathers of Theatre of the Absurd, Eugene Ionesco. He called his play a “tragic farce” and director James Warwick clearly put the accent on comedy. An aged couple, beautifully portrayed by Malcolm Ingram and Barbara Sims, fill the emptiness of their lives with a growing multitude of important visitors—all invisible to the audience, all represented by the titular chairs. Set designer John Musall’s whimsical interior of a lighthouse

with its multiple doors was anchored by a Roman numeral clock face on the floor, a grim reminder of fleeting time. The assembled personages, including the emperor himself, had come to hear the old man's message of a lifetime's wisdom delivered by an "Orator," a moving spotlight whose final message on a dropped banner were the words "Angelfood" and "Adieu." Ionesco's caustic mocking of bourgeois values is tempered by his empathy for the couple's fragile humanity. When the couple finally departed, leaving their home to the chairs, it was with a strange sense of fulfillment. Relating this to our own isolated pandemic world, the director in the program notes asked the audience to "Please join us, not in despair, but in the liberation of tears of laughter." Amen.

In a season filled with bleak laughter from Shakespeare to Ionesco, it is worth noting that a workshop production of Shakespeare's darkest comedy, *Measure for Measure*, will be given a full production next season, Shakespeare & Co.'s 45th.

STEVEN OTFINOSKI
Fairfield University

TRINITY REPERTORY THEATRE COMPANY
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 2021-22

A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens (4 Nov.–26 Dec. in person production for all)

Tiny Beautiful Things book by Cheryl Strayed adapted for stage by Nia Vardalos
(13 Jan.–13 Feb. in person production for all)

Gem of the Ocean August Wilson (24 Feb.–27 Mar. in person production for all)

Sueño Pedro Calderón de la Barca translated and adapted by José Rivera
(7 Apr.–6 May in person production for all)

Fairview Jackie Sibblies Drury (22 May–19 Jun. in person production for all)

The Trinity Repertory Theatre Company opened the 2021-22 season in person with COVID precautions in place and remained that way through the whole season with no major setbacks in the schedule. In preparation for the season, the company evolved its understanding and practice of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). One evident practice was the "Land Acknowledgement Statement" that was spoken live by a company member or aired at the start of every performance, beginning with the press opening

of *A Christmas Carol*. This particular Land Acknowledgement goes beyond listing Indigenous peoples to include the following: “We acknowledge that as contemporary Rhode Islanders, we hold the legacy of this state’s economic foundation through its participation in the triangle slave trade” followed by the encouragement to “research and personally acknowledge these legacies and support our contemporary Indigenous and Black communities in actionable ways.” DEI, Anti-Racism conviction set the tone for the season as the company lived out its mission: truly an extraordinary way to begin the season.

A Christmas Carol opened to thunderous applause as live, in-person theatre was finally back. Company member Joe Wilson Jr. directed with a focus on social justice through the diversity of casting and the use of modern song and dance enhancing the symbolism and inequities embedded in Dickens’s tale. Wilson’s interpretation proved a revelatory and welcoming fresh look to the narrative, especially on the heels of the Land Acknowledgement.

A touching, inspiring, and poignant production of *Tiny Beautiful Things* opened the new year. Sugar, played by Angela Brazil, is a novelist experiencing writer’s block when she is approached to take over an anonymous internet advice column. Brazil’s portrayal of Sugar was captivating and charismatic, responding to the anonymous letters with radical honesty, and a deep understanding of the human condition. Director Curt Columbus and Set Designer Baron E. Pugh set the world of the play in a post office, allowing for dynamic staging and interesting transitions from letter to letter. Coming back to in-person production with a play that empathically excavates emotion and trauma was reflective of the many audience members, who were emerging from a lonely pandemic to laugh and cry in community again.

The powerhouse production of August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* was visually stunning and skillfully produced under the direction of Jude Sandy. He had the benefit of working with two of Trinity’s former company members and local acting titans Rose Weaver as Aunt Esther and Ricardo Pitts Wiley as Solly Two Kings. Their performances were transcendent, an impeccable match for the dramatic journey their characters would embark on with Citizen Barlow, played by Christopher Lindsay. The soul-cleansing voyage to “City of Bones” to learn about Barlow’s ancestral past was a theatrical marvel



Aizhaneya Carter as Keisha in *Fairview*. PHOTO: CAT LAINE

employing song and dance and making for a spiritual experience. The poetic nature of August Wilson's words, inventive staging and design, and standout performances were an inspirational and educational experience for Trinity's audiences.

Next up was the fantastically hilarious and perceptive production of *Sueño* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, adapted and translated by José Rivera. The play was produced on the set of a telenovela with the audience as a character, allowing for immersive fun and wonder. Director Tatyna-Marie Carlo used the farcical nature of the acting, along with the spectacular costume design by Shahrzad Mazaheri, to ground the story in the mid-1600's. The acting performances were hilarious, with each actor playing the comedy with precision and specificity. Company members Daniel Duque-Estrada as Segismundo and Anne Scurria as Basilio put on a master class of comedic timing as the two characters played out their fate in the story of betrayal, superstition, and destiny. The production was cohesive, hysterically funny, and brilliantly placed in the season considering the emotionally wrought journey of the first two productions.

White gaze on Black bodies is the basis of Jackie Sibbles Drury's 2019

Pulitzer Prize winning play *Fairview*. The show created discomfort and discernment amongst members of the predominantly white audience base, challenging them to acknowledge and confront bigotry, prejudice, and microaggressions, specifically racist tropes and stereotypes.

The production was revealing, funny, and at times difficult to watch, as the audience grappled with what appears to be an African-American family sitcom from 1980s' television, played out three times in increasingly more bizarre, sinister, and racist ways, as white characters infiltrate and attempt to destroy their comfortable, upper-class world. Lex Liang's set design was a sprawling two-tiered home that was made for television, painted in off-white tones providing a generic affluent atmosphere. Aizhaneya Carter's performance as Keisha was a revelation and unwavering as the story became tumultuous, absurd, and difficult to witness. It was Keisha who could see and understand that each new character that entered the house in act three was a racist, white portrayal of Black people and inaccurate to the Black experience. Christopher Windom's direction was masterful all the way through to the end when Keisha asks white-identifying members of the audience to come up on to the stage. In that moment, Keisha breaks free from the show and ultimately asks the white audience members to give people of color a "fair view." The performances of the entire company were astonishing, particularly considering the invasive nature of the content. Producing this play thrust forth a critical conversation about race, aligning with Trinity's mission and evolution of DEI.

Trinity's '22-'23 season will begin with *The Inheritance Parts 1 & 2* by Matthew López, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, *Queen Margaret*, drawn from William Shakespeare by Whitney White, and *The Inferior Sex* by Jacqueline E. Lawton. Originally slated for the 2020 season, the final production will be *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by Hugh Wheeler.

CHRISTOPHER R. HOYT
Moses Brown School

VERMONT STAGE

BURLINGTON, VERMONT, 2021-22

Popcorn Falls* James Hindman (28 Jul.-8 Aug., in person at Isham Family Farm, streaming on Broadway on Demand)

Maytag Virgin* Audrey Cefaly (25 Aug.-5 Sept., in person at Blue Heron Pond, streaming on Broadway on Demand)

Winter Tales, conceived by Mark Nash (15 Dec.-19 Dec.)

The Thin Place Lucas Hnath (23 Mar.-10 Apr., in person production at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center)

Annapurna Sharr White (4 May-15 May, in person production at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center)

The Lifespan of a Fact Jeremy Kareken & David Murrell and Gordon Farrell (1 June-19 June, in person at Main Street Landing)

Bakeoff 2022: God of Carnage Yasmina Reza (20 Jul.- 24 Jul., in person at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center)

* In last year's review, I alluded to these two productions as forthcoming and as a way to extend/relaunch productions within the 2020-21 Season. Vermont Stage's promotional materials, however, described them as part of the 2021-22 season, which is why I included them in this year's review.

Like most theatre companies that managed to survive the COVID-19 years, Vermont Stage effectively adapted its production approach and even altered the typical season calendar to do so. As I wrote in last year's review, the company offered a reading series and promoted available online performances produced by other companies but was on official hiatus for most of 2020-2021. At the time of my last review, it had planned two outdoor productions at two different sites for the summer of 2021 as a "relaunch." Vermont Stage marketed these two productions as "picnic plays" and distinct from its regularly scheduled "indoor" season at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center. However, the company's announced 2022-2023 season suggests that outdoor productions in the late summer will become a permanent feature of future seasons, shifting the company's entire season calendar to a late-summer-to-spring model instead of a fall-to-late-spring calendar.

Cristina Alicea, Vermont Stage's Artistic Director, made a sound choice from both a budgetary perspective and a means to reconnect with the company's audience to relaunch in the summer of 2021 with *Popcorn Falls* and *Maytag Virgins*. Both shows are two-handers whose scenic requirements



Chris Caswell and Gina Stevensen in *The Thin Place* PHOTO: DANIEL GALLAGHER

made them good candidates for the two chosen outdoor venues. *Popcorn Falls* felt like a celebratory start to the season. The plot focuses on a small town's attempt to reverse its misfortunes and thwart a corrupt politician's attempt to transform the town into a sewage treatment plant by writing, casting, and staging a play capable of drawing tourists following the loss of its natural waterfall attraction. Patrick Clow as Actor 1 and Sarah Mell as Actor 2 capably played at least ten characters each. Both actors were well cast, but Mell was particularly charming as Popcorn Fall's "handyman." Cora Fauser's costume design supported Mell's substantial physical transformations between her roles with the shifts in hats, shirts, and the creative use of a sweater as a beloved pet of one of the town matriarchs. Chuck Padula's economical scenic design featured a half wall of brick with two exits and a chalkboard as the primary focal point. The actors used the board to indicate the different times and locations, and the half wall provided an opportunity for audiences to enjoy the picturesque backdrop of Isham Family Farm fully. The rolling green hills and the fact that Vermont Stage advertised the production as part of Isham Family Farm's "First: Earth Series" subtly underscored the actual and potential environmental harms at the heart of the plot that the madcap comedy of two actors playing so many characters might otherwise obscure.

By following *Popcorn Falls* with *Maytag Virgin* by Audrey Cefaly, Alicea treated the audience to a somewhat slower-paced and romantic comedy. Local critics in *Seven Days* and the *Times Argus* praised Tyler Rackliffe and Dana Steinhoff's chemistry as the play's opposites-attract love interests. Jeff Modgerer's set provided a poetic interpretation of Jeff and Lizzy's front porches using widely spaced thin horizontal and vertical strips of painted wood, which allowed audiences to see through the gaps and the screen doors to the beautiful outdoor setting beyond.

After their summer relaunch, Vermont Stage produced two fundraising events in the fall/winter before returning with three indoor productions in the spring. The first, Lucas Hnath's *The Thin Place*, was a significant departure in tone from its summer offerings. Directed by Jordan Gulikson, *The Thin Place* was a surprisingly tense and eerie production featuring Gina Stevensen as Hilda, Chris Caswell as Linda, Laura Wolsen as Sylvia, and Andrew Cassel as Jerry. Stevensen's portrayal of Hilda, the young woman at the center of the story, underscored the character's awkwardness and made her appear somewhat haunted, but at times it felt too constrained. Her

performance was much stronger when she broke out of the stylized vocal pattern and flat affect to incorporate broader gestures and vocal choices. Caswell's performance as Linda was physically relaxed, striking a marked contrast between the two characters/actors and making it easy to see how Linda's power as a medium might be simply her ability to read and interact with her clients. Ultimately, Gulikson and his production team managed to pull off several special effects for the production, including Linda's jump scare inducing disappearance in the play's final act. Dan Gallagher's rich color choices and moody cuing aided the séance-like atmosphere of the piece while sound designer Jess Wilson made creative use of the theatre's speakers to shift the direction and volume of her soundscapes to disorient the audience into believing that we, like Hilda and Linda, might have heard the voices of the dead.

Caswell and Gulikson both returned to Vermont Stage in subsequent productions. Caswell appeared as Emma in Sharr White's *Annapurna*, another well-received romantic two-hander. Meanwhile, Gulikson moved from the director's chair to the stage in the company's season closer, *The Lifespan of a Fact*, directed by Alicea. The play explores the timely yet thorny ethical questions around how a writer should convey the big "t" Truth to their reader. The play and Vermont Stage's production were thought-provoking and full of humor. In the role of Emily Penrose, Maria Hendricks thread the needle between imperious and vulnerable. As Jim Fingal, Timmy Lewis was fidgety and eager but most importantly, managed to marshal the appropriate amount of righteous indignation required for the confrontation and showdown with Gulikson in the role of John D'Agata in the final act. Gulikson charmed audiences as the grieving and grizzled genius with a penchant for straining the facts to meet his literary ends. That audiences experience conflict after seeing how politicians and con artists have denied or manipulated facts at all is a testament to the actors and Alicea's direction.

Vermont Stage's 2022-2023 season announcement features Wendy McLeod's *Women in Jeopardy* as the late summer "picnic play," and an indoor season of *The Pitmen Painters* by Lee Hall, *Airness* by Chelsea Mercantel, and *Venus in Fur* by David Ives, as well as the annual Bakeoff production.

ANGELA SWEIGART-GALLAGHER
St. Lawrence University

YALE REPERTORY THEATRE

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, 2022

Today Is My Birthday Susan Soon He Stanton (19 Jan.-28 Feb. in person for members of Yale University community only; 20 Feb.-5 Mar. pre-recorded stream on-demand)

Choir Boy Terrell Alvin McCraney (31 Mar.-23 Apr. in person production for all)

Between Two Knees The 1491s (12 May-4 Jun. in person production for all)

Yale Rep, which offered no productions during the 2020-21 season, followed the precepts established by Yale's recently renamed David Geffen School of Drama, which suspended classes and adjusted graduation years so that students and faculty could remain safely on hiatus during the height of the pandemic. Although the Drama School reopened in Fall 2021, the Rep decided to wait until January 2022 to launch a reduced season of three plays due to "ongoing impacts of the pandemic on student enrollment at David Geffen School of Drama, workflow, and use of its shared buildings." This September 2021 announcement in *The Prompter*, the newsletter for Yale's drama community, also cited "the collective efforts to advance anti-racist training and production by focusing on the well-being of the School of Drama/Yale Rep community, increasing emphasis on process and quality and decreasing emphasis on product and quantity" as rationale for the delay.

When the Rep did reopen in January 2022 with Susan Soon He Stanton's *Today Is My Birthday*, only members of the Yale University community could attend because of continuing COVID concerns. This reviewer was able to watch the production via a recording of one of the performances offered as stream-on-demand in early March. Since it was a straightforward, presumably unedited recording, it was more a documentation of the show rather than a carefully crafted video, more typical of online productions during the pandemic; hence, the on-stage dynamism of six actors playing twenty-six characters got lost in translation despite a turntable revolve on stage. Nevertheless, this 2017 play about loneliness, disconnectedness, and the vagaries of virtual communication resonated for audiences finally getting back to live theatre after a two-year hiatus. The play, set in Hawai'i, is about the local population—the kama'āina—in modern Honolulu, and their striving for meaningful connections in an age where people's interactions are largely remote. Emily, the protagonist, conducts almost her entire life online: even when she is physically in the same space with other characters, they never touch. The show is a dark rom-com without any fulfilling romance yet



Cast members in *Between Two Knees* by the 1491s PHOTO: T. CHARLES ERICKSON

remains optimistic and featured fine performances all around, especially from Jeena Yi as Emily and the celebrated New York-based actor, Francis Jue, in the dual roles of Emily's father and a 104-year-old ukulele player.

A revival of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Choir Boy*, which received its 2012 world premiere in a co-production by the English Stage Company at London's Royal Court Theatre and Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, was Yale's second production. McCraney, who is Co-Chair of the Playwrighting Program at the Geffen School of Drama as well as the Rep's Playwright in Residence, marked his professional New Haven and Yale Rep debut with this show (he received his MFA in playwrighting from Yale in 2007). The play, set at the Charles R. Drew Preparatory School, a fictitious Black institution based on many real-life models, focuses on five exceptional male students who aspire to greatness but are constrained by the ideal of Black manhood that is the school's hallmark. The main character, Pharus, a gifted singer and student, is patently gay and, therefore, not truly suitable as a "Drew man." His interactions with fellow students blossom in choir rehearsals but present challenges elsewhere, especially when forbidden intimacies occur. Although not technically a musical, *Choir Boy's* sublime a cappella singing, occasionally supplemented by beatbox rhythms, was a special delight of the production and all of the actors sang well and delivered rich, nuanced performances.

Anna Grigo's scenic design—heavy, dark, imposing—was a metaphor for the oppressive climate of the school, whose ideals literally loomed threateningly over the students.

The abbreviated season closed with a show that originated at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival: *Between Two Knees* by the 1491s, directed by Eric Ting. This is the first play written by the 1491s, an intertribal sketch comedy troupe better known for YouTube videos; television projects, notably *Reservation Dogs*; and live performances throughout the country. This show, like the rest of their material, presents comedy—slapstick, farcical, ribald—as political resistance, where everything is fodder for critique of the ongoing oppression and racism against Native American peoples. The play covers over one hundred years of Native American history, anchored by the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890 and the American Indian Movement's occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, explained in detail via a QR code in the printed playbill leading to an historical timeline of “what your 1970 textbook didn't teach you.” The production offered a phantasmagoria of oversized props, projections, costumes, caricatures of Native stereotypes (Cleveland Indians, Land-o-Lake's maiden), and eight performers taking on over fifty roles among them. Unfortunately, the night this reviewer saw the show there were COVID concerns within the company, which resulted in the entire cast wearing masks for the performance, which marred articulation and projection, and the absence of two of the most celebrated actors, whose roles were covered by understudies. A respected local critic attested to the show's hilarity on the night he attended, but he also underscored the pain inherent in the play, admonishing audiences to “prepare to be challenged, confronted, enlightened, shamed, and, above all, amused.”²

The Rep announced a four play season for 2022-23, fewer plays than pre-pandemic seasons, which, as recently as 2013-14, had featured six plays. This pronouncement is in line with Yale's reaffirmed commitment to anti-racist practices and humanitarianism, which grew out of the dual concerns of the pandemic and “We See You White American Theatre” movement, and the decision, reported in last year's review, to cut back to a five-day work week prior to technical rehearsals, thus promoting “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.” The new season, to be launched with a revival of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, also will include the world premiere of *The Brightest Thing in the World* by Japanese-American

playwright Leah Nanako Winkler, Luis Alfaro's *Mojada*, and *the ripple, the wave that carried me home* by Christina Anderson.

MARTHA SCHMOYER LOMONACO
Fairfield University

Notes

1. Akhtar, Ayad. "An Antidote to Digital Dehumanization? Live Theater." *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/theater/ayad-akhtar-steinberg-award-digital-dehumanization-live-theater.html>.
2. Christopher Arnott, "'Between Two Knees' at Yale Rep is a dark, and unpredictably hilarious, response to a century of Native oppression," *Hartford Courant*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.courant.com/ctnow/arts-theater/hc-ctnow-review-between-two-knees-yale-rep-20220521-or26w6p75fddngcpwesvtuq3di-story.html>.