

Mixing stage talent to stir up new plays

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TROY, N.Y. - Five playwrights. Five directors. 21 actors. 24 hours to make theater from scratch.

This is the 24hr Berkshires/Capital Region Theatre Project which begins tonight at Arts Center of the Capital Region and ends there Saturday evening at 8 with public performances of the newly minted short plays.

The project is the brainchild of Kristen van Ginhoven, co-artistic director of WAM Theatre, which operates in both the Berkshires and the Capital Region, and Kat Koppett, training director of MOPCO, an improvisational theater company based in New York's Capital District.

They are working in collaboration with Jill Rafferty-Weinisch, director of performing arts and outreach at Arts Center of the Capital Region.

Van Ginhoven and Koppett also have brought in Chris Rohmann, a writer and director from the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts.

"Chris has had experience with this kind of thing in Northampton. He's been a big help," said van Ginhoven, who is serving with Rohmann as the project's dramaturgs.

The idea, van Ginhoven said by cell phone as she was being driven to a rehearsal by her husband, was to assemble a mix of theater artists - directors, writers, performers, designers - evenly divided between the Berkshires and New York's Capital Region and cutting across lines of age and gender.

The project originated in a discussion at The Mount in Lenox last summer when van Ginhoven and Koppett ran into each other at a performance of The Wharton Salon.

"We had both been thinking of doing something together," van Ginhoven said. "I wanted to use Berkshires actors. Kat remembered a 24-hour theater event she had been to some time ago. So, we thought why not?"

Catherine Taylor-Williams, director of the Wharton Salon, was the first director they approached. Not long after, Berkshires actress, writer and director Corinna May signed on. The two soon were joined by three directors from the Capital Region - Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill, artistic director of Capital Repertory Theatre in Albany; Michael Burns, artistic director of MOPCO; and Mark Fleisher, producing artistic director of Adirondack Theatre Festival in Glens Falls, N.Y.

The playwrights are Koppett, Linda Bidwell Delaney and Nahal Navidar of the Capital Region, and Jamuna Yvette Sirker and Susan Dworkin from the Berkshires.

"We wanted a range of playwrights," van Ginhoven said. "Kat and I brainstormed."

The impressive roster of actors includes David Bunce, John Romeo, Tony Rivera, David Girard, Eileen Schuyler and Yvonne Perry from the Capital Region, and Carrie Saldo, Anne Undeland, Emma Dweck, Karen Lee, Adam Sugarman and Joan Coombs from the Berkshires.

"People referred us to other people," van Ginhoven explained. "We also put out calls through Berkshire Creative, various theater companies and other outlets."

"We were looking for experienced artists who could put something together under close, intense circumstances."

"Basically, it was first-come, first-served."

The process begins tonight at 7:30. The public is invited to watch - the project's launch is part of Troy Night, which runs from 5 to 9 in the Collar City's downtown - as the actors, playwrights and directors gather at the arts center to be matched up with each other through random selection of names drawn from a hat.

In addition, each of the five playwrights will select a number from the hat - a 3, a 4 or a 5 - to determine the number of characters in their respective plays. The plays will be built from a "trigger" assigned to each of the playwrights by van Ginhoven and Rohmann.

The playwrights will be sent off to write while the directors meet with their actors and "interview" them, van Ginhoven said, to get a sense of their experience, range, skills and interests.

Directors will receive their scripts by email Saturday morning at 7. At 9, the actors return to the arts center and off they will go with their director to begin rehearsals. At 8 p.m., the curtain goes up. The hope is that the actors will memorize their lines but, van Ginhoven said, they will be allowed to hold scripts in hand during the performance.

"We have about 50 people involved in this," van Ginhoven said. "Our hope is to develop a community of artists. Who knows, once they all get together and spend time together, where it can lead."

Perhaps next year to the Berkshires.