

WAM project connects artists to create five new plays--in 24 hours

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Ready, set, go ...

Once the countdown begins at the second incarnation of a 24-hour theater project between Berkshire and Capital Region theater artists, there is no time to waste, and the clock becomes the ultimate arbiter.

Five playwrights, five directors and 19 actors -- plus assistant directors, stage managers and a coterie of scenic, costume, lighting and sound designers -- will convene at Shakespeare & Company's Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre in Lenox this weekend to create five plays in one 24-hour period. The collaborative adventure culminates in one performance only, at the Bernstein on Saturday, April 14, at 8 p.m.

The "24hr Berkshires/Capital Region Theatre Project" is a co-production of WAM Theatre, which counts itself as having dual homes in the Berkshires and New York's Capital Region, and Schenectady, N.Y.-based improv theater group Mop & Bucket Co. "Everybody knows that nobody knows what's going to happen. The vibe in the audience for an event like this is very different from the vibe of an audience for a show that's been rehearsed for a month. It's a much more edge-of-your-seat kind of energy," WAM's artistic director and co-founder Kristen van Ginhoven said in a telephone interview from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada, where she is working on a production as assistant director. "We want to build this kind of evocative, innovative, exciting experience for the audience, where they have a great time and they're emotionally charged in some way."

The event is a sequel to the WAM/MOPCO partnership on a similar event last year in Troy, N.Y. Participating playwrights are Liz Duffy Adams, Kelli Newby, Kat Koppett, Cindy Parrish and Rachel Siegel. Part of WAM Theatre's mission is to produce works by female playwrights.

The high-energy process begins at 7 p.m. Friday, April 13, when the whole team assembles for a meet-and-greet and then a multistage lottery process wherein playwrights pick numbers indicating how many actors will be in the play they're about to write, directors are assigned to playwrights, and, finally, the pool of actors is randomly divvied between the five plays-in-progress. A "trigger" phrase is also announced, which must be incorporated into each play. (Last year's was "crossing the line.")

The creative baton is then passed to the playwrights, who must e-mail their director a script by 7 a.m. the next morning. The directors then have two hours to think about their

approach to the work, before about five hours of rehearsals start. Each production gets a brief technical rehearsal to work out design elements, and by showtime everything must be in place.

"Most of us probably don't know each other and have never worked together before, so it's a real testament to the collaborative process that we're all going to be thrown into a space together for the day, and at the end of it, five plays are going to emerge," Sara Katzoff, one of this year's directors, said in a telephone interview. Katzoff is one of three founding artistic directors of Great Barrington-based Berkshire Fringe, which will stage its eighth season this summer.

Katzoff did not participate in last year's inaugural 24-hour project, but said she's eager to experience the contrast between the methodical planning she devotes to her other theatrical creations and the quick decision-making and trust in instinct that will be necessary for this experience.

The abbreviated process will require "going deep very quickly," she said.

"There isn't a lot of time to let things gently unfold in a very calm way. In a more prolonged creative process, as a director there is a certain luxury in allowing things to unfold more organically," she said. "In this process, it's really more about getting to the core of what these particular plays are about in a more direct way -- reading the piece, finding out what the heart of it is, and then working with people to get at that."

In addition to providing an invigorating evening of theater for the 150 audience members who will be able to fit inside the Bernstein Theatre, the project is a chance to connect professional theater artists from the Berkshires and Capital Region who might not otherwise cross paths, potentially leading to future collaborations down the road.

Van Ginhoven said it's also a chance for her 3-year-old organization to continue to introduce itself to the theater community and discover potential partners through a creative process.

The creative and technical staffs include a purposeful mix of participants from the Berkshires and the Capital Region.

"It really was a chance for us to try to get theater artists from both regions collaborating together, in this crazy, magic, turbocharged kind of event," she said. "It gets everyone knowing who everyone is, and everyone just lives 45 minutes apart. It creates more opportunity, which is what WAM is ultimately about. It's also just about building that creative community and getting to know who's out there."

Mark Fleischer, artistic director of the Adirondack Theatre Festival, directed a production last year and will serve as one of two on-site producers and dramaturges this time around -- a role that will include everything from determining the order of the plays to making sure scripts are photocopied properly and each team has a chance to iron out technical elements. He said in a statement that last year's experience has stuck with him.

"I left those 24 hours invigorated and rethinking my own creative process on traditional longer projects," he said. "More than that, I felt more connected to this great professional theater community than ever."

The "24hr Berkshires/Capital Region Theatre Project" happens at Shakespeare & Company's Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre (located at 70 Kemble St. in Lenox) at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 14. Tickets are \$15 and include all five plays. The event is appropriate for audience members 13 years of age and older. For tickets or more information, go to wamtheatre.com.