

# Theater from scratch in 24 hours

By Jeffrey Borak, Berkshire Eagle Staff  
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LENOX - "Time is of the essence" the saying goes, especially in Berkshire County's not-for-profit theaters where rehearsal time often averages little more than 3 1/2 weeks.

"I can't think of a single production I have ever been involved in where we felt that we had the luxury of time," Sara Katzoff, co-artistic director of Berkshire Fringe and a 15-year theater veteran, said by email.

"No matter how long the process, there is always that moment where you wish you had another week, another day, even another hour."

But when Katzoff and nearly 50 other theater artists - playwrights, actors, directors, designers, stage managers - arrive at Shakespeare & Company's Bernstein Performing Arts Complex tonight, they won't have another week, another day, another hour. They will have only 24 hours to make theater from scratch.

It all begins around 7 o'clock when the theater artists gather at the Bernstein complex at Shakespeare & Company's 70 Kemble St. campus and meet each other, most of them for the first time ever, for the start of the second 24hr Berkshires/Capital Region Theatre Project. It finishes with a public performance Saturday evening at 8 in the Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre for only 150 ticketholders.

Playwrights, directors, actors and designers - a half-and-half mix from the Berkshires and New York's Capital Region, where the 24hr Project originated last year - will be mixed and matched by the luck of the draw, literally. Names will be drawn from a bowl. Playwrights will pick directors, directors will pick stage managers, stage managers will pick actors.

The playwrights, five of them, all women, will then sit down with their respective casts, chat with the actors, get to know them a little, their interests, get a sense of their skill sets. Then, armed with a "trigger" - a catch phrase or word that will be common to each of the five short plays - the playwrights will go off and write.

Scripts will be emailed to project supervisors Mark Fleischer, producing artistic director of Adirondack Theatre Festival in Glens Falls, N.Y., and Leigh Strimbeck, coartistic director of WAM Theatre, co-producer of 24hr, by 7 a.m. Saturday so they can be copied and handed to the five directors and their actors by 9. With a break for lunch, they'll spend the rest of the day, until 6:30 p.m., rehearsing. Then, at 8, the Bernstein Theatre

opens its doors for the performance, followed by an informal gathering in the Bernstein lobby for the theater artists and audience.

Some of the actors will have scripts in hand during the performance; some may not. "We want to honor the playwright's words, the playwright's voice so if that means keeping a script in hand that's fine," said Kristen van Ginhoven, coartistic director of WAM Theatre, which is producing 24hr Theatre Project with the Albany, N.Y.-based MOPCO ( Mop and Bucket Theatre Company, under the artistic direction of Michael Burns and Kat Koppett).

The 24hr Theatre Project debuted last year at the Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, N.Y.

Audiences were excited, van Ginhoven said, by the new and the unknown; the recognition, she said, "they (were) part of something special, these short plays created the night before and then performed only once and only for them."

For the theater artists, most of whom didn't know each other when the event began, "it was great to meet, play together, create a bond, enlarge the creative community. It made an equal playing field. We got to know each other as artists," van Ginhoven said by cell phone from Stratford, Ontario, where she is in the first year of a twoyear granted program at the Shakespeare Festival.

"We usually cast our shows in New York," Fleischer, who participated in last year's inaugural event, said by cell phone. "This was a tremendous introduction to regional artists, many of whom we're using this summer."

"We were on such a high from connecting as artists, we quickly realized we could do this for many years," said van Ginhoven. The plan is to alternate the 24hr Project between regions - last year the Capital Region, this year the Berkshires, next year back in the Capital Region, and so on.

She is particularly grateful to Shakespeare & Company and its artistic director, Tony Simotes, for donating the Bernstein complex which, van Ginhoven said, has everything the project needs within one location - rehearsal rooms, a theater, food facilities.

In addition to making certain the actors, designers, directors and support personnel have what they need in a material sense, Fleischer will spend much of his time "reassuring actors and directors they can do this; that we can come together as an artistic community with the common goal of going up at 8 o'clock Saturday night.

" I am looking forward to connecting with a number of artists who I have admired but have never collaborated with before," said Katzoff, who will be directing one of the plays. "The project seems to inspire a certain sense of electricity in that way.

"On one hand, 24 hours is not really a whole lot of time to foster deep relationships. On the other hand, it is all the time in the world."

To reach Jeffrey Borak: [jborak@berkshireeagle.com](mailto:jborak@berkshireeagle.com), or (413) 496-6212.