

Women's stories save lives

By Sharon Smullen, Special to the Berkshire Eagle

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(Richarda Abrams plays a New Orleans cast of characters after Katrina. (Courtesy of WAM))

PITTSFIELD -- In a creative climate that has seen collaborations form between a number of Berkshire cultural institutions, the directors of WAM (Women's Action Movement) Theatre and the Storefront Artist Project are planning to show what women can accomplish on stage and in art -- to tell women's stories from Hurricane Katrina to 19th-century Paris -- and to benefit a program that saves women's lives.

A year ago, Co-Artistic Directors Kristen van Ginhoven and Leigh Strimbeck inaugurated WAM Theatre with their production of "A WAM Welcome" at Barrington Stage in Pittsfield.

Now WAM has teamed up with Storefront Artist Project Director Julia Dixon to turn SAP's new home on South Street next door to the Berkshire Museum into a "pop-up" theater for "O Solo Mama Mia -- A Festival of Theatre and Art," and present four one-women plays from May 12 to 15.

A women-themed art show in the SAP gallery-turned-performance space, curated by Stephanie Plunkett from the Norman Rockwell Museum, will open Sunday with a reception from 4 to 6 p.m. Works in a variety of media -- painting, photography, video -- explore themes such as motherhood and female empowerment. The collaboration is a joint effort to support women and artists here and around the world, said Dixon.

For the theatre side of the festival, the one-act plays will appear as double bills -- a range of tales from "Performing Therapy" by Camilla Schade and Kira

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Lallas; "How To Be A Lesbian in 10 Days or Less" by Leigh Hendrix, and Robin Gelfenbien's "My Salvation has a First Name: A Wienermobile Journey," which WAM excerpted in its inaugural production.

In "Stories from Hell and High Water, or When the Sky Falls," Jamuna Yvette Sirker will tell her travels. Displaced from New Orleans in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina, Sirker found her way to the Berkshires and now teaches at Berkshire Community College.

"I was living a very full life in New Orleans as a theatre professional -- writing plays, acting, directing, producing and teaching," Sirker said. "Katrina hit, and it was an experience of epic proportions. As a therapeutic tool, I just started writing."

The resulting play attracted considerable interest, and -- after winning first prize in a playwriting competition -- was produced by Multi Stages Theatre in NYC last April to much acclaim.

To reach a wider audience and make the play more affordable to smaller theaters, Sirker created a one-woman adaptation which will premiere at the WAM festival. Actress Richarda Abrams and director Lorca Peress both come from the original full-length production.

"It's a great vehicle for an amazing actress to come in and play seven different people," said Sirker.

The play is Sirker's first production since she moved to the area.

"I find the Berkshires so healing," she said.

From the county, Berkshire actress Anne Undeland will perform "Paris 1890 -- Unlaced!" -- a play commissioned by Ventfort Hall in Lenox from local playwright Juliane Hiam -- at Russell Sage College in Troy, N.Y., in a second program of plays from May 5 to 8.

"WAM's intention is to be vagabonds and gypsies in different theatre spaces," explained van Ginhoven.

The Berkshires is very interested in women's issues, she added.

In keeping with WAM's "double philanthropy" vision, not only will ticket sales support the theatre company, but a portion will be donated to Edna's Hospital in Somaliland to train at least one community midwife in a region plagued by high maternal mortality rates.

"We have a dream to train 1,000 community midwives," said Edna Adan Ismail, former First Lady of Somaliland and founder of a program that is already saving women's lives in poor rural villages. WAM's support, she explained, "will get us one step closer to achieving our dream."