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All The Town's A Stage



Juliet Bret and Jack Dilday in *In The Summer House* at The Boatslip Photo: John Andrus

by Steve Desroches

Preparing for a theatrical production is always fraught with creative tension and anxiety over the minutiae leading up to opening night. The nervous energy increases tenfold when planning multiple plays and events, like the 11 scheduled for the 9th annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival this weekend. All the imagination and artistic drive, not to mention business details and practical logistics that go into a successful theater festival, create a dizzying to-do list. So then why add a whole new level of frenzy by choosing to stage plays in such unusual places as a 1920s private home in the East End, the deck of the Boatslip, and Provincetown Harbor itself?

“Theater is in real time,” says festival executive director Jef Hall-Flavin. “It’s a very different medium than television or film. The risks we take have a proportional effect on the audience’s enthusiasm.”

Indeed they do. The Festival has continually presented thrilling theatrical experiences utilizing non-traditional theater spaces year after year, which is one of the most beloved hallmarks of the annual end of September event. Since its inception the festival has used traditional theaters and rooms in unique ways by ignoring the stage, bringing the performance to the floor or the balcony, or creating a set design that fully transforms the space in to a decrepit Mississippi Delta mansion in a rainstorm or a street scene in New Orleans’ French Quarter. But beyond that, the festival has created memorable productions performed in the fish house at the end of Fisherman’s Wharf, the hotel rooms of the Gifford House, on the beach along the harbor, and in the hidden gardens of Provincetown.

“It’s part necessity and part choice,” says Hall-Flavin.

While the Festival has masterfully embraced the idea of using non-traditional spaces, the concept is a long-standing Provincetown tradition that dates back to the very beginning of the art colony and the birth of American theater with the Provincetown Players, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, and Eugene O’Neill. *Bound East for Cardiff*, O’Neill’s first play, premiered on a wharf transformed into a theater. Over the years, as theater in Provincetown grew so too did the need for performance spaces, with a barn on Bradford Street turned into the Barnstormers’ Theater (still standing at 27A), as well as other wharves, homes, bars, and churches. The tradition continues into modern times, despite stricter zoning laws, with folks like artist Jay Critchley converting his old septic tank into a “theater” and Ryan Landry and the Gold Dust Orphans staging their very first production, *Medea*, on a friend’s front porch.

“Theater isn’t just entertainment, it’s an event,” says Hall-Flavin. “It’s a civic event. We have a relationship with the playwright in that it echoes in the environment in Provincetown.”

Those vibrations of tradition will be felt within the production of Williams’ comedy *A Lovely Sunday for a Creve Coeur* to be performed in a home located at 175 Bradford Street. Directed by Hall-Flavin the production comes to the festival from Gremlin Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota. First produced in 1979, the play features a circle of four women friends in a comedic effort to help each other through life’s tribulations and disappointments (the play became the inspiration for the 1980s sitcom *The Golden Girls*). When preparing the production for Provincetown it was initially planned for the Hawthorne Barn, but the town’s licensing board said no. Not making a Plan B choice, but rather just a different choice, says Hall-Flavin, the “discovery” of 175 Bradford Street proved perfect as the play begs to be presented environmentally. So when one of the characters is cooking fried chicken and making deviled eggs in the script, the actress playing the part will actually be cooking in the home’s kitchen. Despite the intimacy and lack of actual physical space between the audience and the actors, the fourth wall stays firmly in place throughout all of the festival’s productions. It’s not participatory theater, but rather a kind of immersion that keeps the actors on their toes and the audience in intense emotional striking distance from the action presented.

Just as *A Lovely Sunday for a Creve Coeur* calls for close quarters, the Jane Bowles play *In the Summer House* calls for space, which makes the Boatslip an appropriate performance arena where the actors will utilize the big deck, the pool, the beach, and Provincetown Harbor. A cult classic Williams himself loved, *In the Summer House* is a melodrama about the mysterious death of a woman named Vivien, who slipped from the rocks near her family's summer home...Or was she pushed? The Boatslip becomes a to-scale locale for the action, as does the natural environment nearby.

"It's a play that really becomes a happening," says Hall-Flavin of the play directed by festival curator David Kaplan. "Artistically it uses scale as part of its design. What I mean by that is distance becomes possible."

The possibilities do indeed seem endless in Provincetown, because of both the culture of creativity and the ever-growing theatrical legacy, the size of which is usually reserved for much larger cities. The infused community support for those who seek to present the results of their creative endeavors helps the arts survive in Provincetown. That spirit can be not only hard to maintain, but difficult to find in the first place around the country. But Provincetown's commitment to art and theater appears firmly entrenched, providing an incubator and a portal for creative energy to radiate out of, as it has since the days of the Provincetown Players.

"There's something about the Provincetown mentality that has an openness to it," says Hall-Flavin. "There's an acceptance of that which is out of the ordinary, and I don't mean just in theater, but rather the mindset. We're blessed with a freedom here we wouldn't have in another city."

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival runs September 25 – 28 at various venues in Provincetown. For schedule, tickets, and information call 866.789.TENN or visit twptown.org.