

ISSUE 36
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FRIDAY
SEPTEMBER 3, 2021



SGN

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IN
PRINT

SEATTLE'S LGBTQIA+ NEWS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY SINCE 1974

HOMECOMING

Waxie Moon

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RETURNS

Photo by Eli Schmidt



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Featured Choreographers:

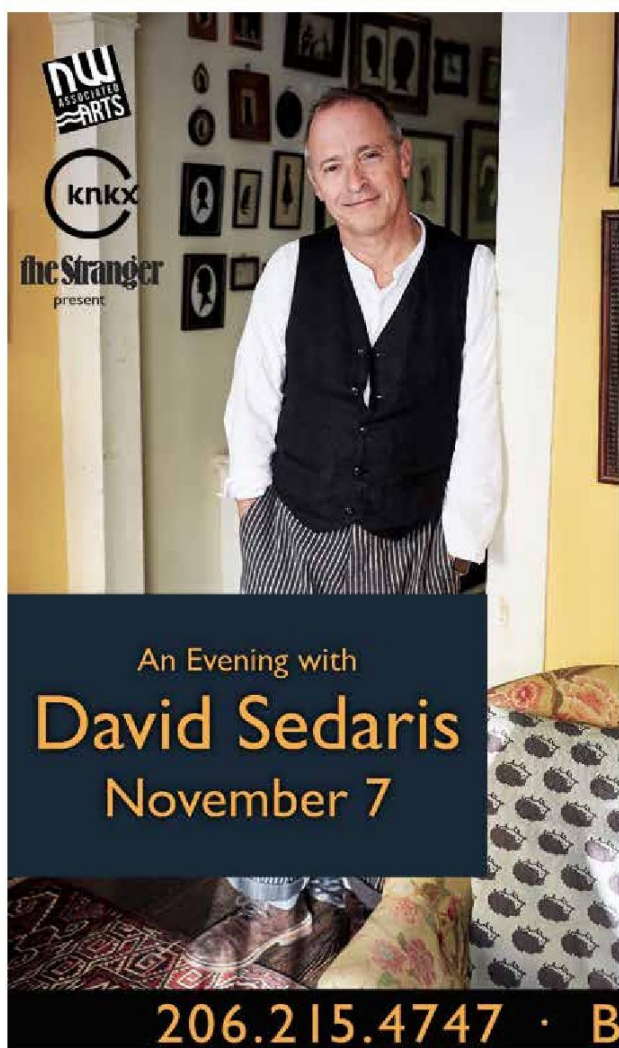
Cameron McKinney
Dance//Novella
Mike Esperanza
Versa-Style

Featured Choreographers:

Alfonso Cervera • Daniel Costa
Jeremy Cline • Levi Ryan
Maevie Barton • Robert Moore
Sean Rosado

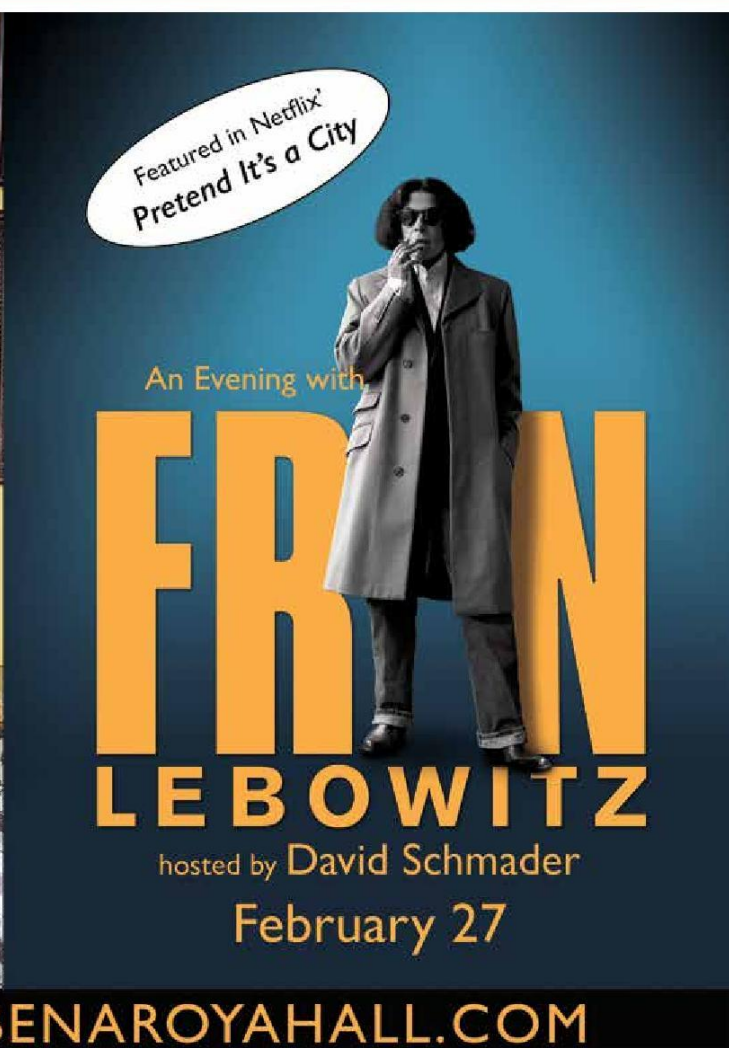


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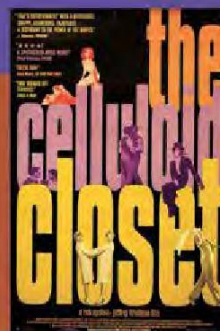
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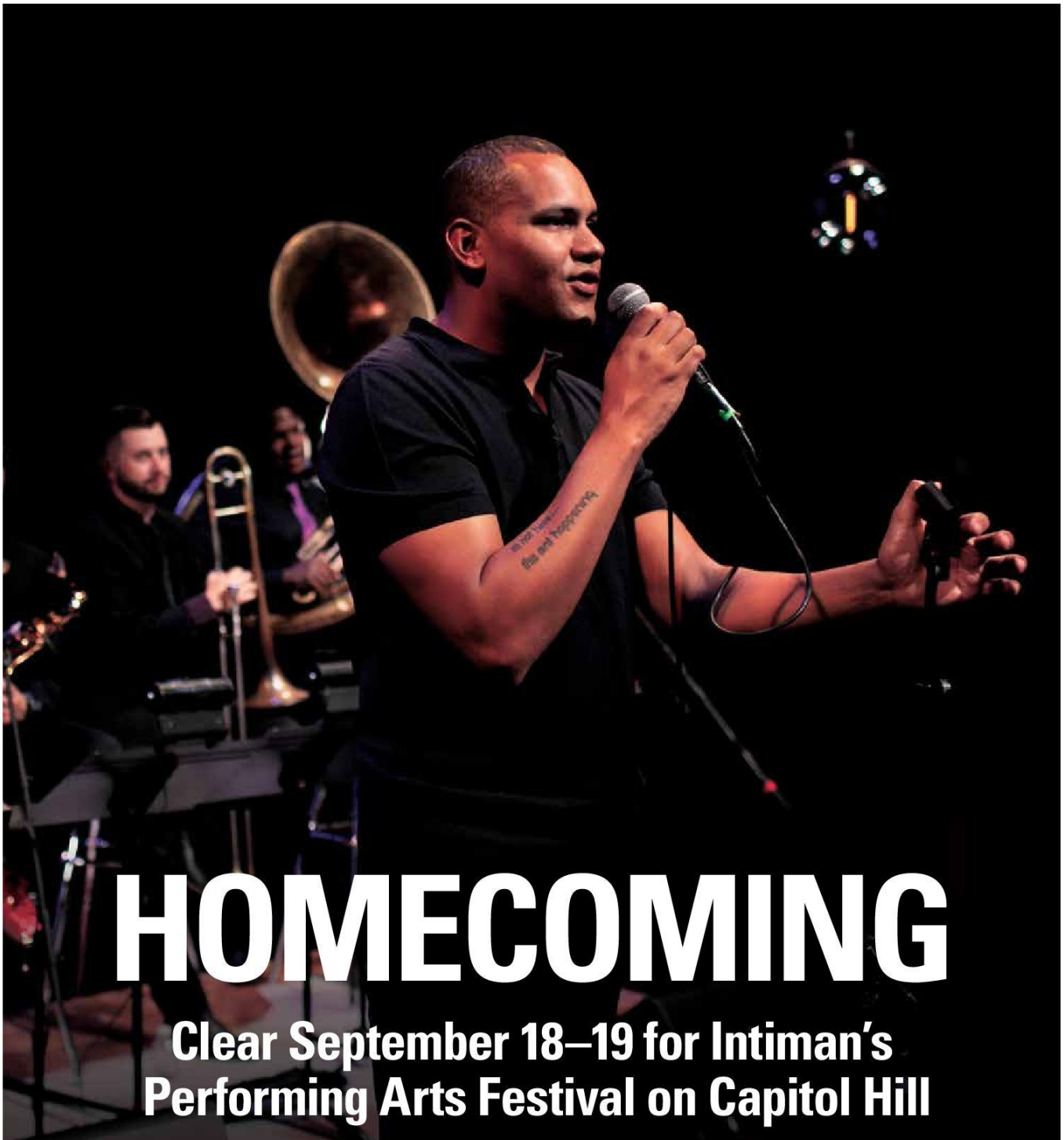
Saving Face
7 September
6pm



6pm
21 September
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HOMEcoming

Clear September 18–19 for Intiman's
Performing Arts Festival on Capitol Hill

Ahamefule J. Oluo – Photo courtesy of the artist

by Hannah Saunders
SGN Contributing Writer

The Intiman Theatre — which “uses the power of story and education to activate dialogue, confront inequity, and build collective joy” — will celebrate the return of the live arts by hosting the **HOMEcoming** Performing Arts Festival on September 18 and 19, 2021 on Harvard Ave. between Pike and Pine.

Although Intiman has put on theatre festivals previously, this will be the first time it will host a large outdoor performing arts festival.

Creative directors Jennifer Zeyl and Wesley Frugé started planning for this back in the early spring. “We’re really excited, with all the COVID stuff going on, [about] having a safe environment where people can come together and

really commemorate our move to Capitol Hill,” said Frugé, who mentioned that Intiman has not hosted an in-person event since September of 2019.

Festival details

The festival will have over 100 artists performing in front of a 24-foot-by-10-foot mural created by Seattle artist Barry Johnson. But that’s not all: the event will also include artist installations; a beer garden (presented with Life on Mars and sponsored by Jack Daniels); food trucks and vendors providing treats such as boba tea, tamales, coffee, and soul food; and interactive photo-booth exhibits. Frugé said that Kendall’s DJ and Event, Intiman’s producing partner, has assisted with logistics, such as shutting down a city street for the weekend.

The festival opens on Saturday, Sept. 18, at 11 a.m. and will close that evening at

10 p.m., but not before Intiman and BECU present the “Angels in Seattle” awards, providing five local artists with \$1,000 checks.

BeautyBoiz will headline on Saturday, which will highlight local drag and LGBTQ+ performers, including Arson Nicki, Cheronna Shinatra, and Betty Wetter. Other performances will be by Bijoux, Velocity Dance Center, and the Royal House of Noir, among others.

All Black local talent will headline on Sunday, Sept. 19, including singer Ahamefule J. Oluo, a brand-new choreographed dance piece by Dani Tirrell and David Rue, and a children’s program called “South End Stories.” BeautyBoiz will also present their “Black Pride Celebration Live!” with performers such as CarLarans, Archie, and DaQueen, among others. On Sunday, the event will begin at 11 a.m. and close at 9 p.m.

“Both evenings are really anchored by

some of the most iconic Seattle performers,” said Frugé, who added that “the two anchor headliner evenings are going to just be so overwhelming in [terms of] the amount of talent.”

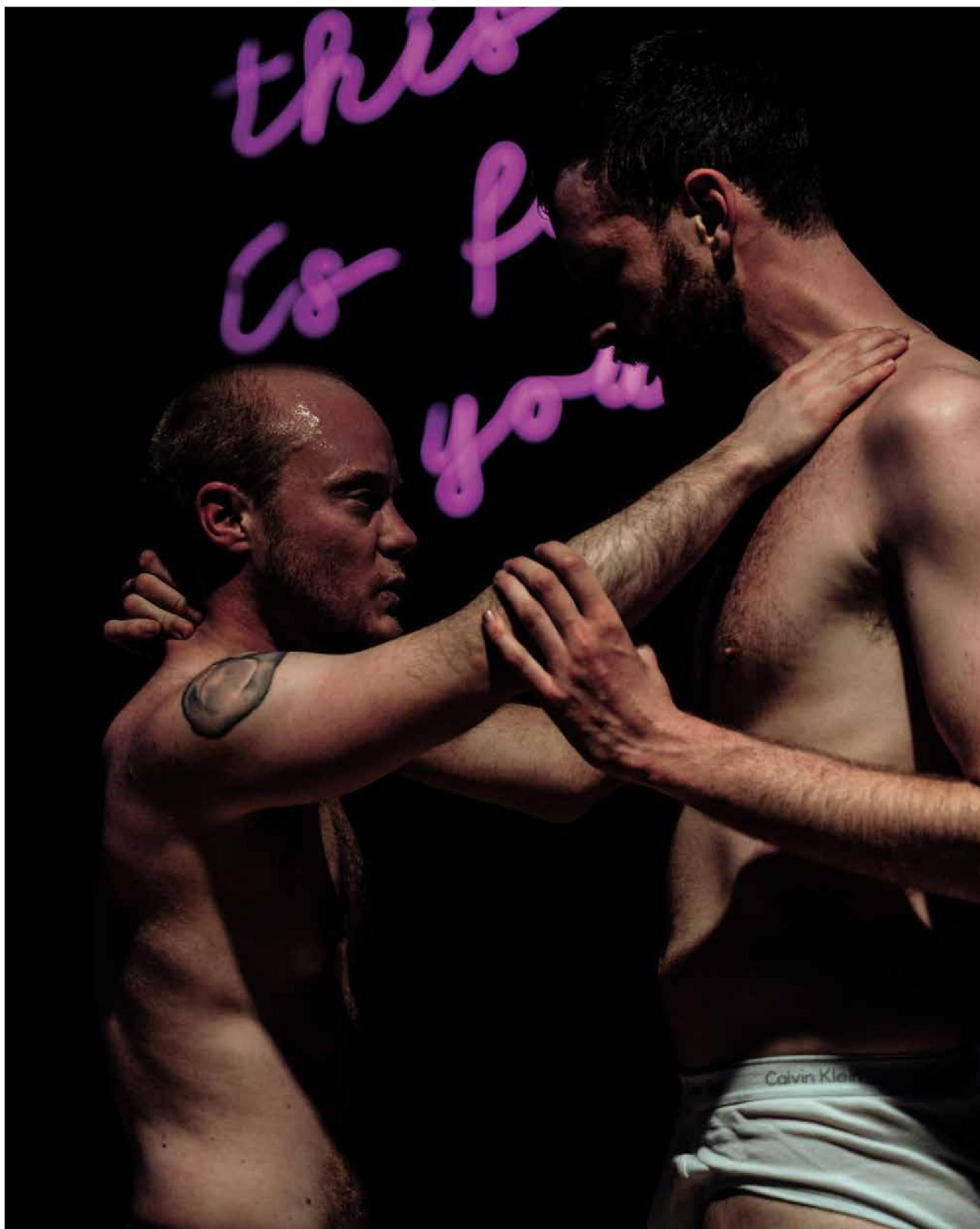
To find artists to perform for the festival, Frugé and Zeyl partnered with various art organizations that share overlapping missions with Intiman. A good number of the artists were booked via presenting partner organizations, although Intiman booked some headliners directly.

“There are some repeat organization lineups, but the actual festival lineup — [there won’t] be any repeated performances,” said Frugé. Café Racer, for example, will be programming both days but will have different bands performing each day.

see **HOMEcoming** page 6



Arami – Photo courtesy of the artist



Drama Tops – Photo courtesy of the artists

HOMECOMING

continued from page 5

Ticket and pass information

Single-day tickets and full-festival passes are being offered online. The former range from \$5 to \$165, with a suggested price of \$65; the latter range from \$10 to \$205, with a suggested price of \$105.

"We are offering a pretty wide range of ticket options, and that is based on Intiman's commitment to accessibility," explained Frugé. That said, Intiman encourages attendees to pay full price if it's within their financial means. Additionally, Intiman will provide 200 guaranteed free tickets on a first-come, first-served basis on each day.

COVID precautions and volunteering

Since this will be Intiman's first performing arts festival, it's hard to know how many people will attend, but Frugé believes there will be about 3,000 over the course of the weekend.

"We are keeping our eye on the capacity of the festival, just so that we can maintain some COVID safety," said Frugé. Outdoor COVID transmission is extremely low — especially among fully vaccinated individuals — but Intiman wants to make sure everyone has enough space to get away from the crowd if needed. Since the event is hosted outdoors, masks are not required for those who are fully vaccinated, but they are more than welcome. However, those not yet fully vaccinated should wear a mask at the event.

At this time, the festival will not be checking vaccination status, since it is an outdoor event, although there is potential for that to change in the coming weeks. Other COVID measures for the event include performer safety and providing hand sanitizer stations throughout the festival.

Intiman is still actively looking for volunteers to work the festival. A variety of shifts remain, including monitoring accessibility seating and providing attendees with information on what's happening next. Volunteers will receive full weekend passes for free and will be given options for tickets at other events by the Intiman Theatre, Kendall's DJ and Event, or BeautyBoiz.

"Intiman is so excited to be the newest arts organization operating in the Capitol Hill

Arts District. We want to introduce ourselves to the neighborhood, be an excellent neighbor, and think about what our role is contributing to the 'gayborhood,'" said Frugé, who added, "Intiman wants to hold space for this LGBTQ+ community and be part of... welcoming people back to Capitol Hill, which was hit so hard by the pandemic."

Visit www.intiman.org/homecoming for further ticket and event information.



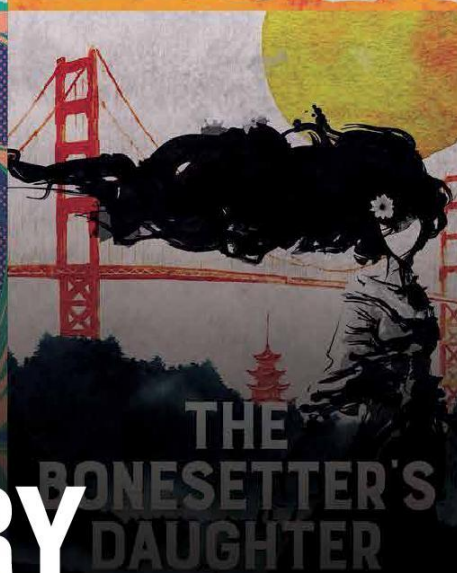
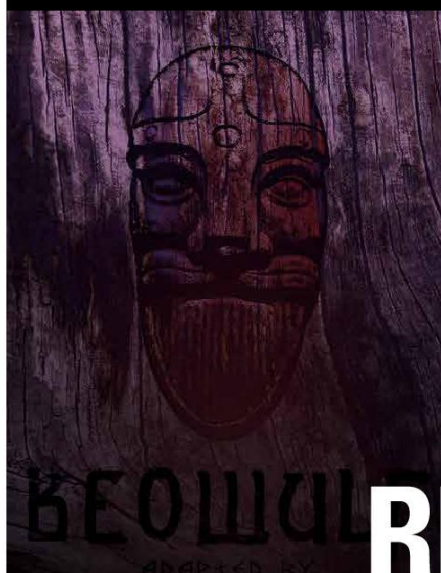
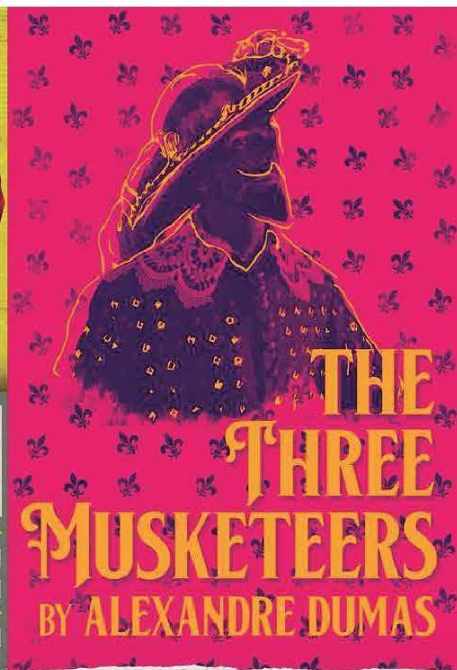
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2021 - 2022
SEASON



ZEN
AND THE ART OF AN
ANDROID BEATDOWN
BY TOCHI ONYEBUCHI



BOOK-IT REPERTORY

Hybrid theatre: A preview of Book-It's 32nd season

Image courtesy of Book-It Repertory Theatre.jpg

by **Paige McGlaufflin**
SGN Contributing Writer

Book-It Repertory Theatre is warming up for its 32nd season. The Seattle Center-based company, which specializes in bringing literary works to the stage, premieres its 2021–22 season on Oct. 12. Audiences will have the chance to enjoy five productions, two as audio dramas and the remaining ones in person.

"We're finding a way to get back to being with audiences. We have a hybrid season. We are starting out with two audio productions and then switching to [being] in person in January," Gus Menary, Book-It's artistic director, told the SGN.

Last year the company opted to make all productions audio dramas, a move that proved to be successful, with listeners tuning in from a hundred countries across five continents. This year, Menary is looking forward to not only bringing audiences back to the theatre but working with a wide array of talent in his second season with the company.

"You're trying to put together teams and great minds... that will sort of gel with each other," he said. "Or you're combining great artists with some great source material. So this season is so much a part of that ethos, while also thinking about what we need as audience members. We're craving the conversation of theater. We're craving the excitement, we're craving the adventure. We're craving that connection that I think at times can feel a little sacred."

The first production from Book-It this season is *Zen and the Art of an Android Beatdown*, available starting Oct. 12. Based on Tochi Onyebuchi's story of the same name, this audio drama is adapted and directed by Gin Hammond.

"It's really, really something special," said Menary. "It's a story about identity, about humanity, wanting, longing, and what it means to be human through a sci-fi lens."

Following soon after is *The Three Musketeers*, available as an audio drama starting on Nov. 23. Part of the company's holiday show, it's a fresh interpretation of the

classic work by Alexandre Dumas, adapted and directed by Lamar Legend.

In the new calendar year comes *Beowulf*, Book-It's first in-person production, running from Jan. 21 through Feb. 6, 2022.

"*Beowulf* is, when you hear it out loud, this story about someone fighting monsters. It's fantastic, thrilling, scary, sacred," said Menary, who will direct this production. "When you're just reading it off the page, just like so many other works, I think it just doesn't quite translate. With that in mind, Julian Glover put this adaptation together, and now we're taking up the mantle with this idea of a return to storytelling and tapping into something more ancient."

The following month will bring *Mrs. Caliban*, the second in-person production, adapted from a Rachel Ingalls novella by Frances Limoncelli and directed by Kelly Kitchens. It will run from March 23 through April 17, 2022.

The Bonesetter's Daughter, adapted by Rosa Joshi from Amy Tan's novel, will be the final production of the season, running

from June 8 through July 3, 2022.

"I grew up in the Bay Area, and Amy Tan is a presence everywhere there... just part of the cultural fabric of where I came from," said Menary. "She is one of our greatest writers. To be able to present it and to have such amazing artists such as Desdemona [Chiang] adapting and Rosa [Joshi] directing, I just feel extremely fortunate. It's going to be, I think, something truly special. I think it's going to be a real gift. I'm immensely honored to have that many talented folks involved this season."

Full-season subscription packages can be purchased online and range from \$122 to \$185, though audio-only subscription packages can be purchased for \$40. For more information on tickets and the 2021–22 season, visit book-it.org/2021-2022-season.

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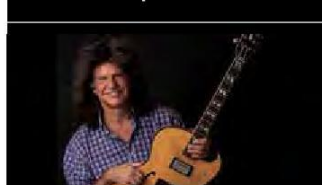
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SEATTLE OPERA

Welcome Back Concert
restores the joy of live performance

Photo by Philip Newton

by Alice Bloch
SGN Contributing Writer

DIE WALKÜRE
BY RICHARD WAGNER
(ABRIDGED BY
SEATTLE OPERA)
FISHER PAVILION,
SEATTLE CENTER
AUGUST 28

During the year and a half since the onset of the pandemic, Seattle Opera has done a remarkable job of creating productions designed to be filmed, with plenty of physical distance between singers. Under the leadership of General Director Christina Schepelmann, the company managed to produce digital versions of all operas planned for the 2020–21 season. The two most recent of those productions (*Flight*, filmed primarily in the Museum of Flight, and *Tosca*, filmed at St. James Cathedral) were particularly vivid and satisfying to experience at home.

However, this week's Welcome Back Concert — an abridged, amplified, minimally staged *Die Walküre* performed outdoors at Seattle Center — reminded opera lovers of what we've been missing: the joy of live performance. The audience was masked, distractions abounded, and essential parts of the drama were cut.

But damn, it felt good to be part of an opera audience again.

The atmosphere was festive and celebratory, with many audience members wearing paper winged hats to represent the Valkyries or colorful T-shirts acquired at past productions of Wagner's Ring Cycle. Although people were not crowded together, Fisher Plaza looked and felt full. Before the concert, parents pushed strollers, family groups shared the contents of picnic baskets, and a rooftop beer garden added to the merriment.

The concert itself was the best possible, considering the difficult circumstances. Ludovic Morlot, conducting a Wagner opera for the first time, led Seattle Symphony musicians in an orchestral performance of rare clarity and expressiveness. The rich texture of Wagner's music was all there, but the sound was never muddy. The wind rattled the microphones and fuzzed the music at times, but Morlot and these excellent musicians cannot be held responsible for that.

Opera singers normally sing without microphones; in fact, their voices sound best when unamplified. One of the thrills of attending an opera performance is the experience of receiving a singer's voice directly into one's ears, unmediated. Of course that was impossible at Fisher Plaza, but the singers stood several feet back from the microphones, and top-notch sound designed by Robertson Witmer made for a decent outcome.

The main characters of *Die Walküre* are Brünnhilde and her father, Wotan, but cuts (admittedly necessary for the concert for-

mat) decreased their roles and showcased instead Siegmund and Sieglinde, the long-separated twins who fall in love in Act I. The most exciting, beautiful vocal performances were also those of tenor Brandon Jovanovich as Siegmund and soprano Angela Meade as Sieglinde. Eric Owens is one of the best bass-baritones around, but he sounded slightly underpowered as Wotan (possibly the fault of the microphone). Soprano Alexandra LoBianco has excelled at Seattle Opera in recent years as *Aida* and *Tosca*, and her voice in concert was lovely, but to my ears, she didn't sound like Brünnhilde the Valkyrie; some vocal heft was missing. As Sieglinde's villainous husband Hunding, bass Raymond Aceto sang well but lacked a menacing edge.

Stage director Dan Wallace Miller did a fine job but is capable of much more than a concert setting permits. Connie Yun's highly effective lighting provided most of the visual interest.

Wagner's glorious score survived the competition of porta-potty doors banging, gulls screeching, and helicopters whirring. In fact, a few of the distracting sights and sounds actually enhanced the show; for example, at one point, the lit-up Space Needle elevators ascended in synchrony with the Valhalla theme. Unfortunately, the helicopter noise was badly timed, coinciding with the love duets in Act I rather than the Ride of the Valkyries in Act III.

In an attempt to make up for the substantial cuts, summaries of plot points were occasionally displayed on the large screens beside the stage. The witty summaries made many audience members laugh and, alas, broke the mood of several serious scenes.

One thing that I learned from the cuts was that the missing parts are absolutely essential to the drama. Without the Act II scenes between Wotan and Brünnhilde and between Wotan and his wife Fricka, we have no sense of Wotan's dejection or of his close relationship with Brünnhilde, so the heart-breaking "Wotan's Farewell" scene falls flat. On the other hand, including the missing material would have meant a four-hour performance with no action, no sets, no costumes, no English supertitles. That would have been a long evening indeed.

Despite these quibbles, I left the concert feeling elated and hopeful, and looking forward to the upcoming season of live performances at McCaw Hall. The first production of the 2021–22 season, *La Bohème*, opens on October 16. Hurrah!

For more information, go to seattleopera.org.

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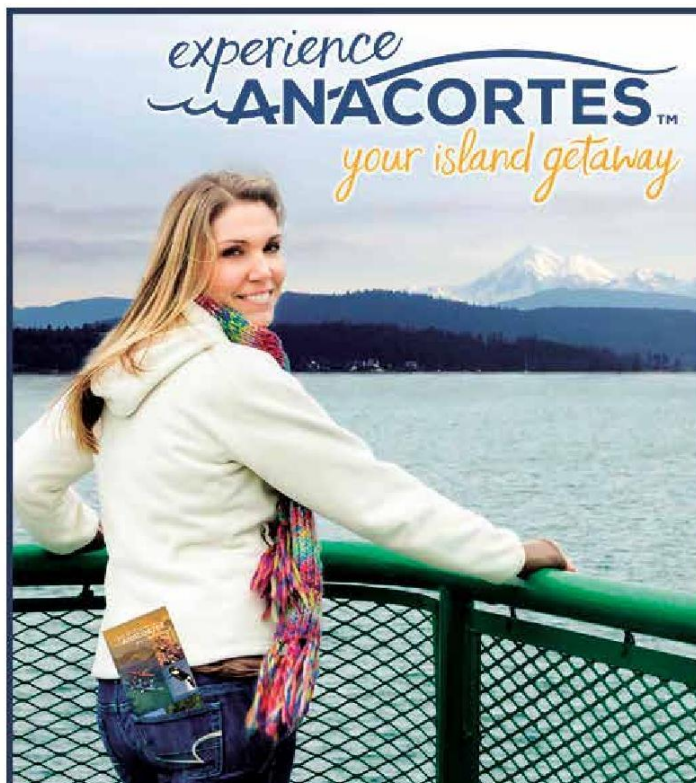


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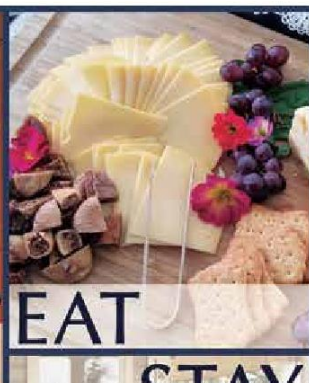
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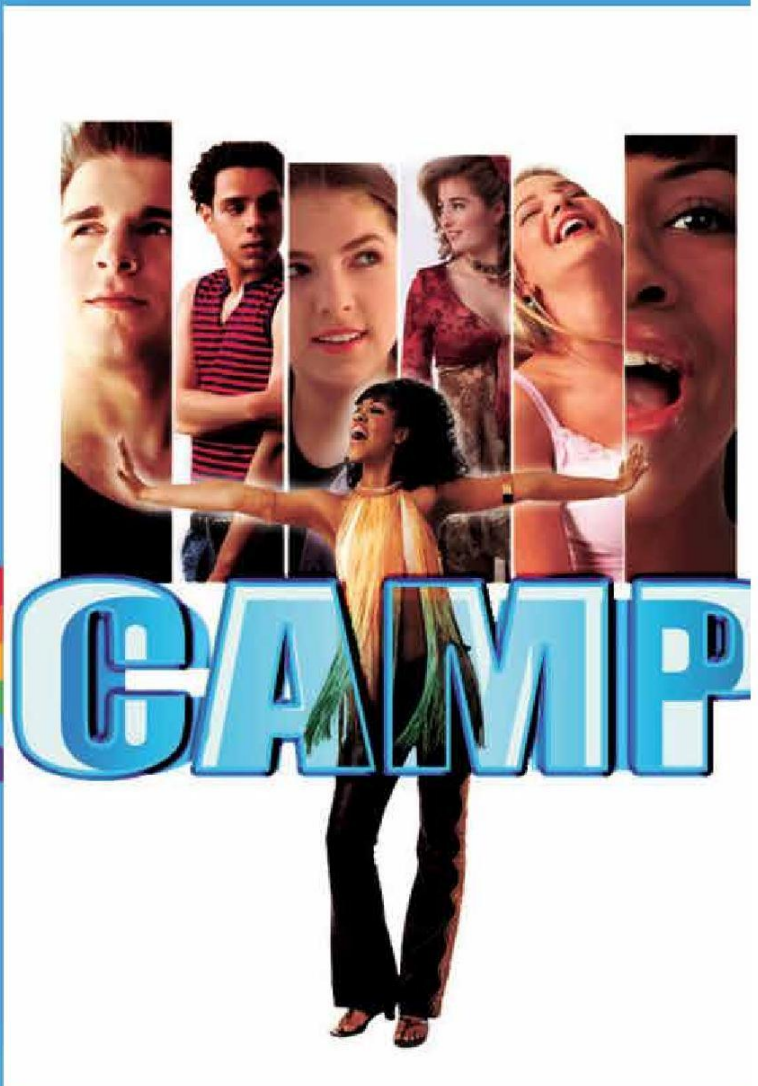
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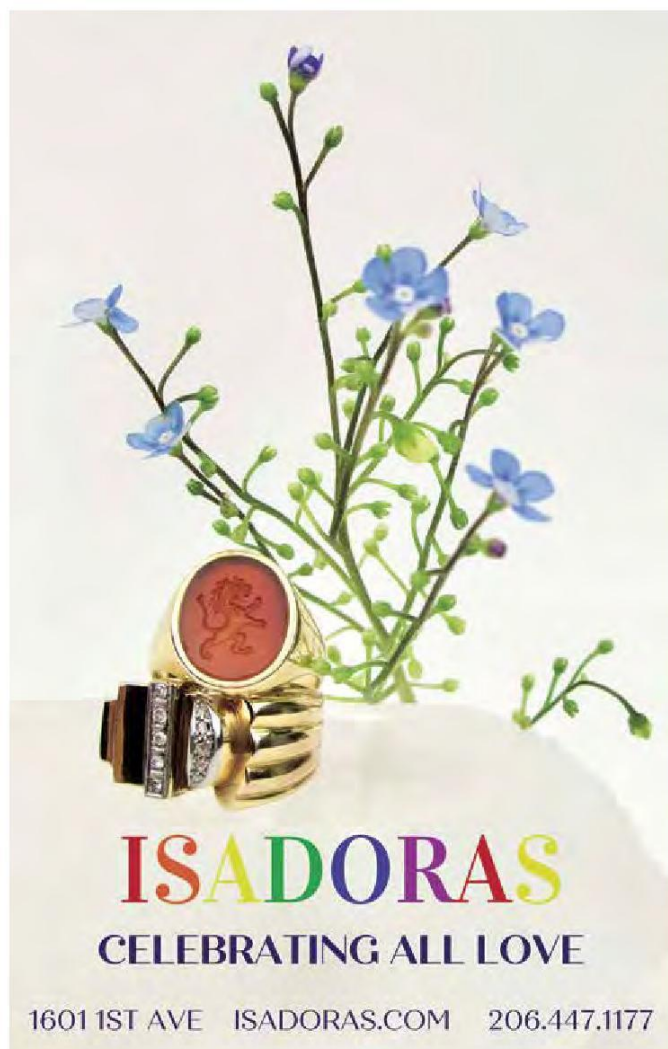
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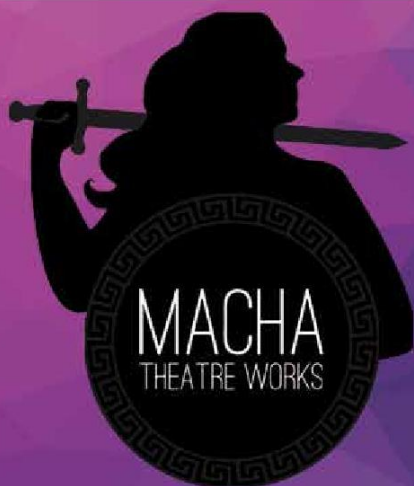
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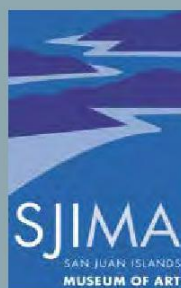
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THE ART OF COSPLAY

Battling discrimination and making dreams a reality

Photo courtesy of the writer

by Janice Athill
SGN Contributing Writer

While dressing up as your favorite fictional character seems like a 21st-century craze, the origins of what is now known as cosplay date further back than many realize. What is widely credited to modern Japanese culture was actually inspired by 15th-century masquerade balls and didn't actually start in Japan.

There is a documented incident of something reminiscent of modern cosplay as far back as 1908, when a Cincinnati couple named Mr. and Mrs. Fell attended a masquerade ball dressed as characters from a popular newspaper strip at the time.

Then in 1939 sci-fi fan Myrtle Rebecca Douglas Smith Gray Nolan, also known as Morajo, attended the first World Science Fiction Convention in New York City. Accompanied by her boyfriend, she dressed in a "futuristic costume" that she designed and created herself, based on the pulp magazine artwork of Frank R. Paul and the 1936 film *Things to Come*.

From there, the hobby became known as "costuming," becoming popular at Halloween and other parties, where attendees would dress according to a chosen theme rather than a specific character.

Character costuming became more popular at comic book conventions and similar gatherings in 1975, after the advent of the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The live viewings encouraged moviegoers to dress up in costume as their favorite characters.

The custom became even more popular among *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fans, but the term "cosplay" wasn't invented until 1984, when Japanese journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi attended Worldcon in Los Angeles. The masquerade impressed him so much that he coined the term *kosupure*,

which became "cosplay."

Cosplaying as a hobby skyrocketed in the 1990s and has become an important aspect of popular culture in Japan, other parts of Asia, and the Western Hemisphere.

One would think with an activity as creative and inventive as cosplay that things like race and ethnicity wouldn't matter. Bringing your favorite characters to life should unite people from different backgrounds. However, it's not as clear-cut as it should be.

For people of color, the cosplay community can be hostile, primarily toward those with darker skin. Terms like "blackfacing" and "raceface" (the "art" of switching your race for a character to be "accurate" and "respectful") have become heated topics.

Cosplayers with darker skin are made to feel unwanted and out of place when it comes to their character choices. The "black version" is casually inserted in front of the characters they choose to portray, and they are encouraged to try and lighten their skin for their costumes or are expected to stick to characters that resemble them, which is inherently racist.

Those with darker skin strong enough to brave the online cosplay warzone take the abuse head on. They handle being called the N-word version of characters, as well as endure death threats for "ruining" a character for someone. Yet they are paving the way for those who have cosplay dreams but are too afraid of the backlash.

DJ's journey

One such person is Devonté Jones aka DJ Croft. This 28-year-old cosplay sensation known for his Lara Croft gender-bending cosplay has not only healthily addressed his own personal adversity but also braved these cosplay waters and served the community with dazzling renditions of beloved characters.

At the age of four, he discovered the popular TV series *Power Rangers*, and like most children, he quickly became obsessed with it. However, that show would prove to be influential for him in more ways than one. Not only would his handmade White Ranger costume help propel his cosplayer status, but his growing attraction to the actor who played the Red Ranger helped him realize and come to terms with his sexual orientation early in life.

When he was six, an adorable and embarrassing outburst of love for a male classmate turned his school years into a nightmare. Kids are cruel, and the early reveal of his homosexuality plagued him from elementary to middle and high school.

Before leaving high school, DJ proved his bravery and maturity by seeking therapy with a school counselor. He was able to work through the self-esteem issues his school experiences caused, and after a while he convinced his mother to join him. Together they were able to reach the acceptance DJ needed for himself and from her, and he was able to gain the insight into how straight parents feel when faced with the knowledge of having a Gay child.

After high school, DJ dabbled in some modeling. It is easy to see why in the fierceness of his photos (all taken by his doting boyfriend). He has been featured in a few magazines and graced the catwalk at New York Fashion Week, but the designers and photographers he worked with never paid him, and so DJ realized he wasn't getting back what he was putting into modeling.

But when one door closes, another opens. And so it was his departure from modeling that set him on the path of professional cosplay. Remembering the joy 10-year-old DJ felt donning a tank top, shorts, and boots, armed with potato chip bag clips as guns, the adult DJ made the best of his limited sewing skills and put together the Lara

Croft cosplay he's now known for.

Held back by the possible scrutiny of venturing into other realms, he fell into a "tomb raider" theme, also portraying Indiana Jones and Nathan Drake from *Uncharted*. But someone like DJ, with an aura as bright as his favorite color (yellow) and the energy to match, can only restrict themselves for so long.

His amazing rendition of Superman immediately became popular, but his gender-bending of Jill Valentine from *Resident Evil* went viral. He awoke the next day to two thousand likes on Twitter, and the numbers have continued to climb.

Since then, his favorites, like his White Ranger— and Rita Repulsa—inspired villain costumes, have been huge hits, as has his gender-bending of Sailor Pluto from the *Sailor Moon* series. We were able to have a wonderful conversation, at the end of which he left me with these words of inspiration:

"To the world I know we live in a society where everything is a label, a race, a language, your sexuality, but don't let it be a label. You are more complex than a label. We're not meant to be put in boxes and told what to like or who to like. I want to encourage everyone to make a difference, and when you hear noise, don't listen, don't believe it, tune it out. Say you're awesome, and understand that there's nothing wrong with saying to yourself that you are awesome."

DJ has been certified, followed, and retweeted by the official Tomb Raider and Power Ranger Twitter pages, which is not only a dream come true for him but has put him in position to be a positive role model. He is allowing dark-skinned children like himself to see that, armed with a glue gun and creativity, they can make their cosplay dreams a reality.

"I had to do it... With all the inclinations and desires of the boy I had to restrain myself to the more conventional ways of the other sex. I have been happier since I made the change than I ever have in my life..."

- Alan Hart, 1918

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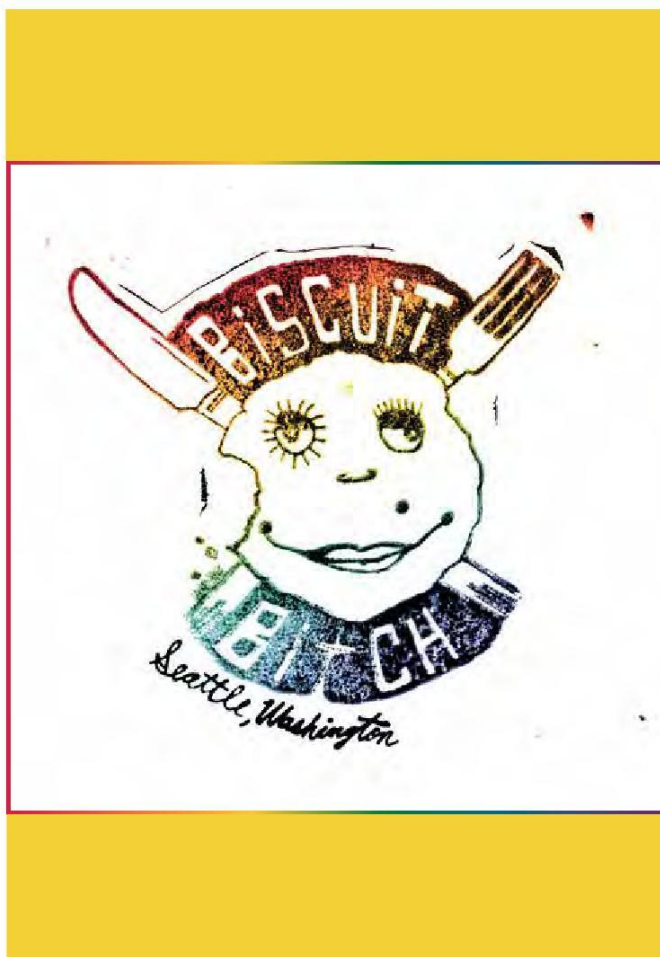
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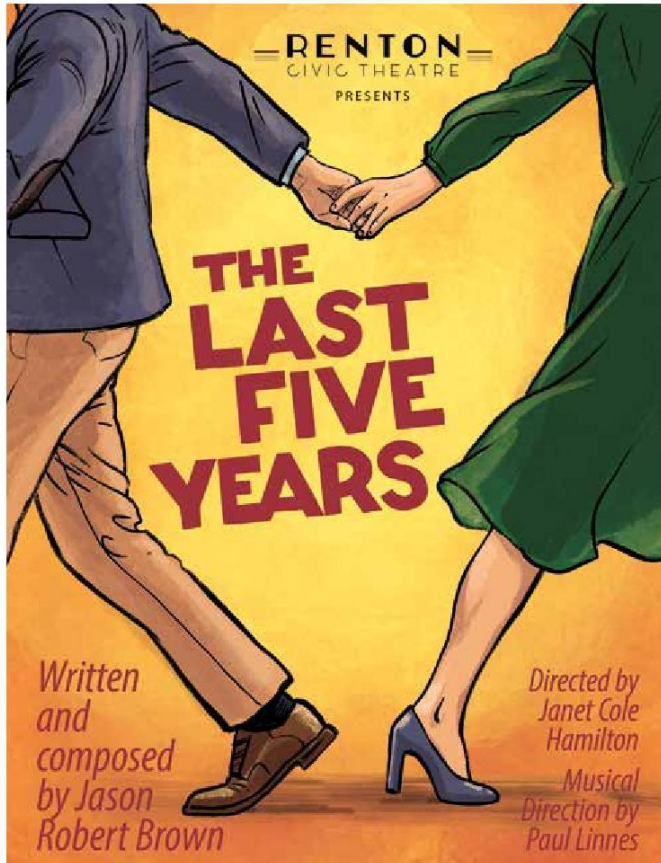


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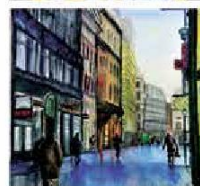
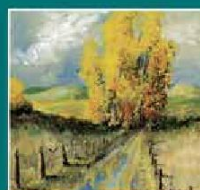
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JEANNIE RAK

Jeannie Rak is Seattle's newest shining star

Photo courtesy of the artist

by Lindsey Anderson
SGN Contributing Writer

Seattle is no stranger to musical talents. From Pearl Jam to Jimi Hendrix to Macklemore, some of the industry's finest talents have risen to fame right here on the city's rain-soaked streets.

One of the newest talents in the industry, Jeannie Rak, is hoping to make a name for herself in the same way other Seattle artists have done.

Before following her passion for music, Rak was a teacher in White Center, but after finishing her master's program at the University of Washington and teaching fifth grade for a year, she realized music was the true path she wanted her life to follow.

Although she is new to the recording end of the business, Rak has been performing for the last few years, making a living at the city's historic Pike Place Market. "I am not primarily a recording artist. Before I started recording in a studio, I was actually a busker — it's basically just a street musician, or street performer in general — and I was doing that full-time for two years at Pike Place Market," Rak explained.

Rak was successfully making a living in the market until the pandemic hit. "I was first and foremost a live performer, so I needed the crowds at Pike Place Market to make a living, and really what went away when the pandemic hit was that. So recording was my way of responding to COVID. So yeah, it's a little backwards for me."

After being forced to reevaluate her career yet again, Rak decided to go in the direction of recording original music in the studio. Her first single, "Heart, Broken" was released earlier this year on all streaming platforms, and she plans also released a new cover, *That Girl*. Beyond that, she is looking to drop an album in September.

Making the transition from busker to recorder was difficult for Rak at first. "I have a whole folder of songs I curated as a busker, because you learn very quickly, 'Oh, okay, people will tip me if I sing these songs,'" she explained. Some of her favorite covers to perform are works from Sara Bareilles, Jason Mraz, and John Mayer.

"[Being a busker] influenced and taught me, in a really positive way, how to be an engaging performer, but it hasn't really had much of an impact on the music that I write and create for myself," Rak said, "so when I transitioned from being a live performer in Pike Place doing only covers to being a recording artist in a studio and having a producer and recording my own original music. That was like wearing two completely different hats. I had to actually reverse a lot of the habits I had picked up as a busker."

One challenge Rak faced in the studio was releasing a song she had written seven years ago. "Heart, Broken" was originally a song about one of her first heartbreaks back in college. Revisiting the single as a now happily married woman in a much different headspace was a strange feeling for Rak.

"What's interesting is that you change as a person," she explained, "and having written material so long ago, and then wanting to produce it in the studio, part of the difficulty was putting myself back in the headspace and trying to understand what I was feeling when I wrote the song." Luckily, Rak's producer was there to help, even suggesting she add in a bridge to bring the song into 2021.

Musical inspirations

Rak draws much of her musical inspiration from Top 40 hits, and isn't ashamed to admit one of her favorite bands is Maroon 5. "They straddle this really cool line of kind of funk and pop and rock in a way that makes acoustic songs very rhythmic. His voice is amazing, too. He sings in my register, and he's a man, Adam Levine."

"My taste is very mid 2000s, singers like Usher and Neo," she added, "and then there's the obvious ones like Jason Mraz and Sarah Bareilles, but then, on top of that, my mom really loved listening to Bill Withers, so I love his music, too."

While many artists might find inspiration in unique and alternative artists, Rak is proud to be a fan of Maroon 5 and other mainstream pop artists. As she explained the origins of her music taste, "I think a lot of the reason I love Top 40 is because I grew up in a country that doesn't primarily speak English. But because I did, I listened to all the Top 40 English radio stations. But there weren't people around me to educate me on punk rock and ska and all these alternative forms of music, so that is very much new to me. I didn't even listen to Nirvana."

Rak grew up in Thailand with her mother, father, and brother, who, she explained, were her original music teachers. "Growing up in Thailand was wonderful," she gushed. "I learned music from both of my parents — my mom taught me my first four chords on guitar, and she's got an amazing voice."

She was never short on performance opportunities in Thailand, either. Her school would use her talent as an example of the excellence they were able to produce, often having her perform for school functions.

Moving to North America

When it came time for her to choose a college, however, Rak looked to get as far away from Thailand as possible. She found a wonderful university in Canada, inspired by its liberal arts programs, but her desire to move

to North America was also deeply rooted in wanting to find a community that would accept her for who she was.

"Being queer in Thailand, it's not illegal, you don't necessarily get *harmed* violently or physically, but it's not accepted in the same way that it is here, either. There was a lot of my own personality that was suppressed until I moved to North America," Rak shared.

From the age of 16, Rak knew she was Queer. "I was watching some videos of a pretty out lesbian creator on YouTube. She's gone a little batshit crazy since, but at the time, her videos were pretty valuable when it came to processing what it meant to be a young queer person coming out. It was like someone hit me over the head with a bat, and I was like, 'Oh my fucking god, I'm gay!'"

"And then I had to keep it a secret for the next two years, which was pretty rough."

Rak moved to Canada in August of 2011, and came out publicly in October of the same year. While she's been out to her parents and brother since then, she knows that the life she lives in North America is very different from the experiences of LGBTQ folks in Thailand. She acknowledges the privilege she has to live such an accepting place, and was candid about the impact her identity might have on younger listeners in Thailand.

"I have the privilege of living an out life because I am in a place that accepts me. It feels wrong to say that I can be that figurehead, because I'm not the one living an out life in Thailand in a place that represents harm or lack of safety. It's kind of facetious to be like, 'Oh, you'll be fine, just come out!' when I'm living in America and not Thailand," she said.

Falling in love

After college, Rak did attempt to return to Thailand for a little while, but the experience was difficult. While away at school, Rak had fallen in love with one of her close friends, Khlea Dean. Being across the world from Khlea was hard on Rak, and eventually, she made the decision to move back to North America, so she could be with her.

In order to obtain her visa, Rak went back to school, pursuing a master's in teaching. "It feels weird to say, but I picked teaching because I had to. Being a student is kind of a straight path to becoming a citizen of the United States, and I moved here to be with Khlea."

Music may be Rak's passion, but the life she has made in Seattle with Dean seems to be her purpose. Rak's voice shone with emotion as she gushed about Dean. "We've been married since April of 2019, just a little over two years now," she said, as her voice echoed

with joy.

Dean fully supports Rak's musical career. "She comes out to more of my shows than I ever expected her to," Rak said. "I'm like, 'Love, you know, I'm just going to sing the same songs I sang last week,' and she's just like 'Yeah, that's great!'"

When not performing, Rak and Dean love to explore the beautiful city of Seattle with their 15-year-old Corgi, Jackee. "For me it's this perfect blend of urban and green and new and old, and it feels like it's always keeping me on my toes. I feel like I can always learn to evolve in this city," Rak said.

Finding community and performing in Seattle

Since coming to Seattle, she has also been able to find communities of diversity. "Lately, since becoming a teacher in White Center, I found the pockets of brown people and queer people I wanted to connect with, and the more I find that, the more my music will continue to find an identity, and a color, quite literally."

Since moving to the city, Rak has also seen her talent skyrocket. She loves performing at Pike Place. "It has a lot of that old-school Seattle vibe to it, despite being a touristy area. It's very grunge, very punk, and it's like real people, you know, working hard to serve folks coming from out of state," she said.

Working in the heart of Seattle, Rak was able to hone her skills. "My voice got so much more powerful, because I was just doing that all the damn time. I could just practice guitar and learn new songs."

Whereas before her focus was to just make money and improve her musical talents, now Rak is looking toward an even brighter future, hoping to take her act from bar and restaurant gigs to entire venues just for her.

But no matter how big Rak gets, she will never lose sight of where her heart lies: right here, performing live in the center of Seattle. "When busking came back [to] Pike Place again finally, my cheeks were cramping from smiling so much, because I was so happy. When I play, I never perform better than when I can connect with the audience and see someone is vibing to the music and I am making their day better. It's such a straight path to someone else's heart, and that's what I love."

Jeannie Rak's first single, "Heart, Broken" can be found on Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, or anywhere you stream music. If you're interested in watching one of her amazing live performances, she will be featured at the Lowdown Ballroom on Saturday, September 4.

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THE LOWDOWN

The lowdown on Seattle's most intimate art space

Photo courtesy of The Lowdown

by Lindsey Anderson
SGN Contributing Writer

Just past the chaos and excitement of Broadway on Capitol Hill sits a small venue dedicated to bringing the arts to one of Seattle's most expressive neighborhoods. But if you aren't looking for the Lowdown Ballroom, you might just walk right past it!

Located in the renovated basement of Madeline and Alex Yan's home, it offers a unique performance space for all kinds of artistic talents, since the Yans converted it in 2016.

Both well known in Seattle's swing dance community, Madeline and Alex had not originally set out to create a venue for the arts. "It started with wanting a garage, because the house did not have a garage originally. We dug out the basement, and because we're dance nerds, we decided to put in a semi-sprung dance floor. We just went hog wild," Madeline explained.

After they had done that, a friend from the swing dance community asked if he could use the space to host weekly dance classes. The request got the couple thinking, and soon the plans to convert their basement and backyard into a ballroom and live-event venue were underway.

A labor of love

The arts have always played a special role in Madeline and Alex's life. "We met dancing," shared Madeline. Alex added, "I started swing dancing in 2002, and she started in 2004. We were friends for a while

and then it just evolved." So it only seemed fitting that the couple would create a space for other dancers, fostering the unique passion that led them to each other.

The ballroom began as a venue for dance classes, with a roommate of the Yans teaching tango while another friend offered swing dance lessons. "Wednesday is tango night, and every Thursday is swing dance. [For swing, there are] three different classes: a solo jazz class that's open to all levels — it's independent dance, you don't need a partner; ...beginning lessons, which [are] partnered, but you don't need [to already have] a partner; and then the third is intermediate/advanced, for anyone who has already taken lessons."

In early 2020, Madeline and Alex decided to expand the reach of the ballroom, opening the backyard for live summer performances. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to that, but the ballroom was able to host one event before the city shut down.

"After regulations were lifted, we started doing live shows again. I think we might keep doing them throughout the summer. The outdoor shows are free, but down [in the ballroom] it's mostly ticketed events," Alex explained.

The outdoor concert series has been a massive success so far this summer, featuring local talents like Jeannie Rak, Righteous Sistah, Kevin "Muscle Mouth" Buster, and Mira Dasu & Lamar Lofton.

"Right now we're doing an aggressive push to reach anyone and everyone," Madeline said.

"We really want to reflect the character and the history of the neighborhood — that's very important to us. And there are so many groups out there that are underrepresented and not included, and welcoming them is important to us."

The Lowdown Ballroom has hosted several LGBTQ artists and bands, following through with their goal to welcome underrepresented groups. In fact, the first two acts featured in the summer concert series were local LGBTQ artists, and upcoming performer Jeannie Rak (September 4) is also a member of the LGBTQ community.

Arts are for everyone

Breaking into the live-performance business can be stressful, but the ballroom is working to help up-and-comers find space to perform live and perfect their crafts. Every few weeks, the ballroom hosts "salon" nights, where anyone is welcome to take to the stage and showcase their talents, giving new performers the chance to practice in front of a live audience without the high-stakes pressures other venues might demand. "It's so intimate, so community oriented," Madeline explained.

Through these events, the ballroom has been able to provide outlets for fans and performers to connect.

Lowdown offers a wide variety of shows. "Our shows are not just jazz. We have singer-songwriters, folk, bluegrass, Americana. So far it's been mostly acoustic," Alex said.

While the venue has mostly booked

singers and musicians, they are looking to expand. "In the future, we would love to see more burlesque shows and drag shows. We're open to anything, pretty much."

The venue itself offers a spacious indoor room, big enough for large events and private concerts, as well as anything else patrons might imagine. The outdoor space is just as charming, offering great acoustics and a cozy backyard atmosphere. "We've got this red velvet curtain, amazing back-lighting," Madeline pointed out.

"I love nightlife, I think it's the best," she added. "You know, it's a small space, but I've seen what different communities have done with small spaces. They can make magic."

The space is open for all events, as long as they are not illegal or encouraging hatred toward any marginalized communities. The Yans believe "art should be for everybody." Their hope has been that by opening up their home to Seattle's arts community, they will be able to foster growth and creativity for artists and art lovers alike.

The Lowdown Ballroom can be found at 628 11th Ave. E. The next free outdoor concert features Jeannie Rak, a Seattle-based LGBTQ+ musician, on Saturday September 4, from 4 to 7 p.m. Tango lessons are held weekly on Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m.; swing dance is taught on Thursdays at 6, 7, and 8 p.m. For more information, visit www.lowdownballroom.com.

Henry

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