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A renewal of vows

Two River Theater Company celebrates 20th anniversary season



Joel Grey will direct 'On Borrowed Time,' the inaugural production of Two River Theater's 20th anniversary season. / Courtesy of Andrew Eccles

Written by Tom Chesek
For the Asbury Park Press

- Sidebar: SETH RUDETSKY'S SPOTLIGHT: A BROADWAY SPECTACULAR

WHAT: An evening of performances and stories to benefit Two River Theater with Veanne Cox, Kaitlin Hopkins, Camille Saviola and Hayley Treider from the cast of TRTC's production of Noël Coward's "Present Laughter," and an intimate conversation with Tony and Academy Award winner Joel Grey

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesday, June 25

WHERE: Two River Theater, Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

TICKETS, MORE INFO: \$50-\$200; \$200 tickets include exclusive pre-show reception beginning at 6:30 pm and premium seating in the Rechnitz Theater; 732-345-1400 or TRTC.org

There are some things old, from centuries-old classics to octogenarian showbiz greats — and there are, of course, some things spanking new. Also some things borrowed from (or at least shared with) other presenting entities, and maybe even a playwright or two who's been known to work a little blue.

It's the newly announced 20th anniversary season of Two River Theater Company, the professional stage troupe founded by Monmouth University professor Robert M. Rechnitz at the West Long Branch campus in 1995 — a company that spent several seasons in residence at Manasquan's

Algonquin Arts Theatre before moving into its own custom-constructed performing arts center in Red Bank in the spring of 2005.

As previewed by TRTC's John Dias in a special presentation on June 2, it's perhaps not so much an anniversary as a renewal of vows between the Two River team and its audience, for whom "we want to make sure we're doing work that you want to see."

Introducing the fourth season of programming offered under his tenure as artistic director, the veteran of Joe Papp's Public Theater lauded the 2013-2014 slate of mainstage productions as one designed to "honor the mission of this theater;" to partner with "the exciting artists working in the theater today;" and to "reflect the 20 year history of Two River Theater."

He was preceded at the podium by Rechnitz, the retired academic and stage director whose name (with that of wife and co-founder, Joan) graces the Bridge Avenue building's main auditorium. Playfully characterizing Two River Theater as an institution that is "too good to fail," the longtime executive producer recalled the inaugural skin-of-our-teeth staging of A.R. Gurney's "The Cocktail Hour."

"We defied the odds then ... and we've been absolutely delighted ever since," he said.

50 shades of Grey

The 2013-2014 season kicks off on Sept. 14 with a "golden age" American favorite that employs the talents of a stage and screen legend — Joel Grey, who garnered a Tony and an Academy Award for his signature role as the Master of Ceremonies in "Cabaret." The 81-year-old Grey revisits a play in which he appeared at the age of 9 — Paul Osborn's folksy fantasy "On Borrowed Time" — this time as director for the moving tale of an old man whose concern for his orphaned grandson inspires him to cheat Death personified.

The season continues on Oct. 26 with a special offering of two interrelated works presented in repertory. Actor and writer Martin Moran won an Obie award for his solo piece "The Tricky Part." The frank and humorous autobiographical "meditation on redemption and forgiveness" is being coupled with select performances of Moran's follow-up "All the Rage" — a work inspired in great part by people's reactions to the earlier play.

For their annual holiday season family show, the Two River team has a fresh go at "A Wind in the Willows Christmas," the original musical adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's beloved animal characters that saw its world premiere in Red Bank in December.

Boasting a score of songs by Sarah Schlesinger and Grammy-winning Nashville hitmaker (plus former NFL lineman) Mike Reid, the production that goes up Dec. 7 promises, by popular demand, “a lot more holiday spirit” and redesigned costumes that accentuate “ears and tails and fur.”

Also returning from this current season are Jacob Fishel and Michael Sexton of the Shakespeare Society — the lead actor and director of TRTC’s “tempest-tossed” production of “Henry V” — in a forest-fresh take on the Bard’s “As You Like It” that begins its run Jan. 25.

The 2014 calendar year continues with a fully staged version of a drama that was first seen in Red Bank as a reading from the company’s annual “Crossing Borders” festival of new Latino plays. Set in “the strange new land of Reagan-era Wisconsin,” Andrea Thome’s “Pinkolandia” spotlights a pair of sisters who deal with their family’s relocation from Pinochet’s Chile by inhabiting an imaginary world of their own. Jose Zayas directs the Red Bank production, the third of four “rolling” premieres in cities across America.

The acclaimed director Jade King Carroll takes the helm for “Trouble In Mind,” the 1950s comedy-drama by celebrated African-American novelist and playwright Alice Childress. The “backstage” story of a black actress at odds with a white director goes into previews on April 5.

Directorial debut

Also in the house on June 2 was Tony-nominated Broadway veteran Michael Cumpsty (“End of the Rainbow,” HBO’s “Boardwalk Empire”). The star of the current Two River production of Noël Coward’s “Present Laughter” came equipped with a surprise up his sleeve — the announcement of his major solo directorial debut, as he mans the megaphone for TRTC’s take on “Third,” the final work by the late Pulitzer Prize winner Wendy Wasserstein.

The playwright who, in Dias’ words, “takes a hard look at a particular kind of New Yorker for whom Lincoln Center is ground zero,” was among the first to have their work produced by the fledgling Two River Theater Company. The production that goes up on May 31, 2014, traces a circle with a new-era TRTC as represented by Cumpsty, an artist who made his debut on the Red Bank stage with 2011’s “Much Ado About Nothing.”

Full details on subscriptions, group and single-ticket purchases for the upcoming season of Two River Theater presentations (as well as for summertime special events that include the return of Crossing Borders and the Summer Jazz Café) are available at 732-345-1400 or www.trtc.org.