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MICHAEL RHODES AND AUDREY RAPOPORT REHEARSE IN THE CARPENTER SHOP THEATER

STORYTIME FOR ADULTS,
WITH WHISKEY:

TIVOLI'S TANGENT THEATRE COMPANY

By Ross Rice

It seems a bit incongruous at first. The off-pink two-story house in Tivoli that houses the Black Swan pub seems a lot more, at first glance, like a beer-soaked fraternity hang, probably due to its being the closest bar to the Bard College campus. But on certain evenings over the last couple of years, the Swan makes a transformation, thanks to a motley group of actors—and favorite stage directions reader, Steven Young—clutching dog-eared scripts, pints within swigging range. Though it doesn't quite compare to full stagings, these “pub readings” of contemporary theatre works by the Tangent Theatre Company have become quite popular since the company moved up from New York roughly two years ago. Locals have enjoyed “hearing” works by Edward Albee, Martin McDonagh, and Donald Margulies (to name a few) at the pub. The company has even recently successfully staged John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* at the town hall, to great regional acclaim.

Tangent has finally realized one of its main goals with the acquisition of its own theatre space—an old carpenter's shop just off Main Street in Tivoli—and celebrates the occasion with a full staging of Albee's

classic *Zoo Story* in mid-August. But not without a twist: two directors with two casts perform the play on consecutive weekends, offering audiences two different glimpses of the same work. As its name suggests, Tangent finds its own path to beat, a different angle to approach the theatre from. Considering how safe many companies play it these days, this is indeed welcome news.



While it may seem counterintuitive to start a theatre company in New York City, then move it up to Dutchess County, for Tangent this is actually more of a homecoming, as core company members Michael and Andrea Rhodes are both originally from the area: Michael from Poughkeepsie, Andrea from Lagrange. The theatre was not exactly in the cards for either, initially. Andrea graduated from Boston College, and immediately moved to New York City to pursue a career in advertising and marketing. Michael was still seeking his bliss. “I came late to acting, started when I was in my 20s. I never thought that I would

want to be an actor. I was selling lumber for a living, and I thought there had to be more to life than pricing molding.” Michael took an acting class at Dutchess County Community College from Steve Press, who told him he should really think about pursuing the dream. “I grew up on ‘70s cinema. I wanted to be “Cool Hand Luke” when I was 14 years old.”

Press recommended checking out Poughkeepsie’s Apple Blossom troupe, who, at the time, was doing “serious minded work.” 1989 found Michael auditioning for them, where he worked with future Tangent partner Keith Teller in a version of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. “That was instrumental for me. We were working with a great bunch of young actors who were really hungry, and really serious. For three years, we met every night, we had pizza and beer, we did scene study, did improv, did plays that we wrote and directed, all kinds of stuff. Then the city wanted their space back, and we all went our separate ways: L.A., Chicago, and New York.” When a show Michael was working on at Woodstock’s River Arts made the jump to the New York stage, making it possible to accompany the show there and secure a much-coveted Actors Equity (union) card, his choice was made: New York it would be.

Meanwhile, Andrea had pretty much had it with the Big Apple, and had moved up to Rhinebeck to sort things out. Invited to a friend’s wedding, she attended and found herself charmed by an intense young gentleman from the theatre. “When we first met, she wasn’t an actress. I was so thankful!” laughs Michael. Not that he doesn’t appreciate actresses; it was, after all, at an actress friend’s wedding where he met his lifemate. Pretty soon, they were an item, and Andrea returned to New York with Michael.

They settled in a nice one-bedroom apartment in the West Village, and soon Michael was realizing the value of having his own company, and that collaboration was key to creating new theatre in the City. Old friend Keith Teller was also around, and in 2000, they formed Tangent

in a euphoric moment after having just pulled off another successful Godot production for a local theatre festival—their first in New York. The company of actors and writers numbered between 10 and 15 in the core, with special guests. “We loved the idea of an ensemble. I think that there’s a difference between seeing theatre coming together and actors learning to work together, as opposed to people who just know (how to already).” Andrea made herself invaluable. “I have a lot of TV and advertising experience. Because of that, I just fell right into the theatre stuff. I’m all behind the scenes, marketing and promotion.”


Michael also scored a plum gig, touring the American premiere of Albee’s *Three Tall Women*, working with the director himself—a hugely gratifying experience. While on the road, Michael worked on a new play to “keep sane.” Like many first plays, it was semi-autobiographical, “a coming of age thing.” The play came in handy; when a planned Tangent premiere of a British play fell through at the last minute, Michael’s *wanderers* was slotted in, and it did quite well in receiving hard-to-get attention, thanks to an effective publicist he met on the Albee tour. As Andrea says “I’ve always said if you have to tilt the budget one way—especially in New York—it’s critical (to have a publicist).” Michael recalls when Albee visited backstage post-performance. “He came up afterwards, had some nice things to say, including ‘I want to ask you one question.’ I said ‘OK.’ He said ‘why is it a lower case w (in the title)?’ I said ‘well, really, I thought about it. The characters in there, up until the end, don’t really stand up for themselves.’ He said ‘Ah, OK. But why the lower case w?’”

Another successful project was their Subway Series, six one-act plays by different playwrights. Michael: “One of our best (actor) friends was always getting the nice guy roles, so I wanted to write a rougher role for him. Wrote a play called *The Local*, about a guy who gets beaten up on a subway platform, and a police officer who comes to talk with him about it.” After a performance one night, a friend told them he knew of another writer with a subway-based one-act, who, once contacted, led

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to another, and soon they had six, covering a variety of subway-related themes—though not all actually take place on a train. The show did rather well; New Yorkers do have a special affinity for their subways.

A family trip to Ireland in '06 brought Michael and Andrea further inspiration. Andrea: “Out of a random thought, I started looking up theatre companies in Dublin, and emailed a couple of them that looked nice online, introduced myself, saying it’s our first time here, we’d love to share stories, talk to you.” Two wrote back, one was available to meet, and suddenly kindred spirits became good friends—over a few pints, of



MICHAEL RHODES AND GREG SKURA IN WAITING FOR GODOT BY SAMUEL BECKETT

course. The Dublin group AboutFACE had a list of favored American playwrights, and lo and behold....two were Subway Series writers.

While in Dublin, AboutFACE turned Tangent on to the charms of pub readings, or as Michael puts it, “story time for adults. With whiskey.” Upon return to New York, they ran the idea by their neighborhood Irish pub, which had space downstairs they could use for free. Rental space for Tangent performances were starting to climb out of the realm of fiscal reality, so Michael figured this would be a good way to keep their flavor of theatre in the public eye, where the public drinks.

“It really clicked with the audience. We moved around a little bit more in (this venue), because we had more space to move around in. It’s tighter at the Black Swan, but we found that by focusing it further, no blocking, no miming, just reading and stage directions moving the play forward, it focused the audience in a completely different way. The imagination is more actively involved; it’s like storytelling when you were kids.”

As it got more and more difficult to stage productions in New York, thanks to company members starting families and the rising costs, Michael and Andrea considered their next move. The great little one-bedroom apartment in the West Village just seemed to get smaller, and a larger sized upgrade required a renewed commitment to the city. A trip upstate to visit Keith and catch a 2008 production of *Godot* at the Fisher Center (at Bard College) ended with the group hanging out in Tivoli, enjoying dinner at Santa Fe. Though both were originally Dutchess County raised, Andrea had never really been to the hamlet before, and with the temperate October evening enjoyed with friends and *Godot* cast members, the place just felt right to both. Michael: “We saw where, in Dutchess County, there were a couple of different areas we could do plays. And suddenly, we were talking in a way we hadn’t been for three or four years.” It took awhile for “the breakup with New York” to occur, but finding a nice place down by the Hudson River sealed the deal.

“When we first came to Tivoli, we thought it would be our oasis, our nice little quiet corner that not too many people know about. But it has an unbelievable arts vibe. When we moved here in early 2009, we thought we’d produce maybe in Hudson, Rhinebeck, Poughkeepsie. We thought we’d do a couple of pub readings. We approached Michael Nickerson, who owns the Black Swan, about doing some things. We did a few, and the response was inspiring, to say the least.” Each reading brought in more and more people they didn’t know, always a good sign. Plus, it was a sharp, educated crowd to boot.

And Tivoli has responded warmly. The mayor himself offered the upstairs space at the Watts de Peyster Hall for last year’s production of *Doubt*, free of charge. When Michael approached Martin Clarke, the gentleman who owned much of the downtown space, about using his carpenter shop as a place for a possible upcoming performance of Donald Margulies *Sight Unseen*, Clarke offered them use of the space—permanently. This sort of thing never happened in New York. “That was very energizing to us.”

It’s a modest space, to be sure, with abundant natural light thanks to southerly-facing windows, but little or no backstage space. Technical issues will need addressing, a grid for light fixtures is needed, and heavy curtains and acoustic treatments will be required to make the space properly neutral. But not much more, as Tangent leans toward language and character studies over visual spectacle and histrionics. As Michael explains, “I always like plays that you feel rather than think about. I like gut-level things, not much for the intellectual side. I grew up on Martin Scorsese, Sidney Lumet, the actors from the ‘70s I’d watch on VHS time and time again. I wanted a (John) Cassavetes film onstage. It’s more about behavior, human interaction, why we do the things we do.”

Between fundraisers, more pub readings at the Black Swan, and select performances in the new space, Tangent—which in addition to Michael, Andrea, and Keith includes Jessica Beasimer Teller, Greg Skura, and Jennifer Skura—has a bright future in the Hudson Valley theatre scene, following their own “tangent” off the usual Shakespeare and tired musicals of summer repertory, bringing vital theatre into new spaces and unexpected places. Sometimes even with whiskey.

Tangent Theatre Company presents Edward Albee’s Zoo Story, at their new Carpenter Shop Theater, 60 Broadway, Tivoli, tangent-arts.org, 845.230.7020, Fr/Sa/Su August 19 through 28. Fr/Sa 8 PM, Su 3 PM



JILL VAN NOTE READS DINNER WITH FRIENDS BY DONALD MARGULIES AT THE BLACK SWAN



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