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Behind the scenes: Cotuit Center for the Arts expands its offerings

By KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL

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Cotuit Center for the Arts is aiming to appeal to a variety of theatergoing tastes. Case in point: last week.

The center was holding auditions for both "Anything Goes" and "Glengarry Glen Ross." Rehearsals were ongoing for "Side by Side by Sondheim" in one theater, for "No Exit" in the other.

"David Mamet, Jean-Paul Sartre, Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim - it doesn't get better than that," says artistic director Daniel Fontneau.

No arguments here. And although the Mamet and Porter shows are happening later this spring, the Sondheim musical review (which opened Feb. 3) and Sartre's "No Exit," about three people consigned to live with each other in hell (which opens Friday), are running simultaneously through Feb. 20.

After a financially rocky 2010, the center has leapt into 2011 with an ambitious schedule of theater, music, art and education planned. "No Exit" is the launch of a residency of the fledgling Theater Under the Stairs group, showing off the renovation of the Botello House at the front of the compound into a true black box, 25-seat theater.

Executive director David Kuehn says officials learned last summer that it was possible in terms of logistics and audience response to run two shows at once when "Camelot" was in the main building and "Ghosts" was the test show at Botello House. Besides Theater Under the Stairs shows ("Medea" is coming up in April), Fontneau and Kuehn hope to program other small productions there - "bare-bones" shows, more risky material, things with smaller casts and meaty scripts," Fontneau says - as well as staged readings, poetry readings, workshops, improv and other events that

require no more than minimum staging and furniture the center already has.

Unlike other theaters that are trying to raise money to expand, the Cotuit center added a venue with largely what it had on hand - paint, minimal furniture, lights, soundproofing and sweat equity. With the financial woes, there was little choice.

"The possibilities are huge," Kuehn says of filling the new space. "I think once we open 'No Exit,' and get more people coming through, it'll be exciting."

Actress Holly Erin McCarthy, co-founder of Theater Under the Stairs, says producing a show in the small space will be exciting, too. Chris Compton, show director and company co-founder, is setting the Sartre show in the round, with chairs along every wall, further enclosing the space that confines the characters.

"What better way to show three people in a small room than have three people in a small room?" McCarthy asks. "Every seat is going to have a different point of view, and that could cause you to root for one particular character. Our dream would be for someone to want to come back and sit in a different seat to get a different point of view."

Having the additional theater, as well as adding a second art gallery on the main building's second floor, is aimed at making more programming available and getting more people to come to the center "campus." Then perhaps cross-pollination can happen.

"The more, the merrier. We like to have a lot of stuff going on," Fontneau says. "We're hoping people coming from the Sondheim (show) will see what's going on in the Botello House and take a chance and so try something a little different."



DANIEL FONTNEAU

Appearing in Cotuit Center for the Arts' "Side by Side by Sondheim" are, from left, Lily Mae Harrington, Martha Paquin, Laura Garner, Kevin Quill, Todd Bidwell and Glenn Wall.

While there were big to-dos last year for Sondheim's 80th birthday (including naming a Broadway theater after him), Fontneau says he chose this show now simply because he's a huge fan and he knew the composer's work would attract the area's top voices. The "informative, informal" revue, directed by Mark L'Calisi with musical direction by Elizabeth Becket, is "wall-to-wall songs" - some well-known, like those from "Gypsy," "West Side Story" and "Company"; some not so. A narrator links it all together with some explanations and context. Fontneau says, and the six actors are elegantly dressed with simple staging on multiple levels around the two pianos that provide the orchestration. (To see a video of one of the songs: <http://artsonthecape.com>.)



“Twelfth Night” at Barnstable High School includes ‘slapstick and verbal comedy, two love stories revolving around a woman disguised as a man, a plot to make a fool of a snobby egotist and disco dancing.’”

If you go:

What: "Side by Side by Sondheim," a revue of Stephen Sondheim music. When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Where: main theater of Cotuit Center for the Arts, 4404 Route 28. Tickets: \$10-\$20. Reservations: 508-428-0669. What: "No Exit." When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 20. Where: Botello Black Box Theater at Cotuit Center. Reservations: 508-428-0669.