



The Flickering Flame of Theater

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by Steve Desroches

Top Image: Jane Barish and Patrick Riviere performing Peter Pan in Campfire Quorum's premiere production of Trailblazer in the dunes of Herring Cove Beach.

When Jacques begins his monologue in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* with the immortal words "all the world's a stage," he could very well be speaking about Provincetown. Be it the Provincetown Players on a wharf to today's pandemic-adapted theater in parking lots, performance here has long utilized most every space as a stage. As the creative world begins to bloom again, with pandemic protocols gone, all of that pent up energy is giving birth to brand new ventures, including Campfire Quorum, a nomadic, ecocentric theater company that reimagines the theatrical experience. Founded by Megan Nussle, Campfire Quorum performed *Trailblazer* in the dunes of Herring Cove Beach this past Memorial Day weekend in a preview of the style this new theatrical venture will present to Provincetown.

"Over the pandemic, I kept thinking of how theater could return after a year of no theater," says Nussle. "We spent so much of the past year watching movies or TV, or watching virtual events. The

difference between a lived experience rather than being just a passive viewer became clear. And I had nothing but time to think about it.”



Jane Barish and Patrick Riviere performing Peter Pan in Campfire Quorum's premiere production of Trailblazer in the dunes of Herring Cove Beach.

This spring Nussle turned the potential energy into kinetic energy when she formed Campfire Quorum, whose name is a nod to the idea of humans since prehistory sitting around a fire telling stories, with the audience required to bring such tales to life by connecting with its creators. The theater company has no home, and that's the point. By making use of natural settings there's no need for lighting or elaborate sets, as that's provided for by the local environment. It's "leave no trace" theater, as when the experience is over all that's left behind are footprints and the impact of the work.

Trailblazer presented three vignettes of pieces from *Peter Pan* and *The Tempest*, as well as a scene from *The Witch*, which will be performed again for three weeks in August in a soon-to-be-announced wooded location. The production of *The Witch* will return in September at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, which this year explores the theme of Tennessee Williams and censorship. *The Witch* was written in 1616 by Thomas Middleton, but not published until 1728. It's not entirely known why it took over 100 years, but historians tend to think it was the Puritans' fault. In this retelling, Nussle sets the action in Provincetown, shortly after the arrival of the *Mayflower*, where the Pilgrim women slip off to the woods after laundry day on the beach to perform a play in the woods

dressed as men. In actual 1620 something like that would have been as scandalous as it was dangerous, as Puritans disapproved of theater in general, never mind women performing, and the belief that evil witches actually existed was very common in the era.

A graduate of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Nussle went on to earn a master's degree in directing from the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, where she studied abroad as an undergraduate. She's bounced around working as a director and a dramaturg in Boston, the Berkshires, and New York City before coming to Cape Cod to work with the Tennessee Williams Festival, eventually becoming the assistant to curator and co-founder David Kaplan. It is perhaps a hallmark of the Festival to use unconventional spaces for performance. In the past the Festival has hosted productions on the beach and even on Commercial Street, as well as in private homes and hotel rooms with the audience's nose right against the fourth wall, which remains firmly in place. And Campfire Quorum is in the same vein as it is experiential in nature, but not interactive.



Jane Barish and Patrick Riviere performing Peter Pan in Campfire Quorum's premiere production of Trailblazer in the dunes of Herring Cove Beach.

"The location really serves the story," says Nussle. "It's not a history tour or a reenactment, it's theater with an enormous set."

Kaplan's mentorship and her experiences with the Festival have inspired Nussle to dig into the core of her love for theater beyond an industry that can focus more on commerce than art. And with the help of artist Jay Critchley's nonprofit Provincetown Community Compact, which took Campfire Quorum

under its umbrella organization, the theater company can focus on the artistry. Theater is a challenging venture, never mind trying to figure out the incredibly complex paperwork to become a nonprofit entity. However, staging plays outside in environments with infinitely more unpredictable variables beyond a sneeze or a cough here, or a chatty audience member there.

“Oh, I love it,” says Nussle of the unpredictable nature of this kind of theater. “I love it so much. We had these birds in a bush nearby during rehearsal that just went nuts. It was at first distracting, but it’s part of what happens when you do a play like this. It keeps you on your toes. It’s what makes it exciting. It’s live. This doesn’t happen when watching TV. It’s real. It also feels a little dangerous, which can make an audience anxious. But don’t worry, we got you.”

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