

Arts & Entertainment

Facing Hard Truths in *Janice Underwater*, Season Opener of Premiere Stages at Kean

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Premiere Stages Theatre at Kean University is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a new play that is a frank, 90-minute look at family relationships involving members who deal with mental disorders. In a world where genetic testing can tell us so much, should people glimpse their medical future? Is blood one's fate? The play *Janice Underwater*, written by New Jersey native Tom Matthew Wolfe, examines that question and a number of others that face the main character, Janice.

Janice (Amy Staats) is an unpublished artist whose strange behavior may or may not be the rebirth of her mother's mental illness in her. In the opening scene, the main character is at an office party where she and a weirdly masked woman get into a combative discussion over work and philosophy. It is clear that Janice is either experiencing some emotional breakdown or that she is mentally unstable as she shares a fantasy of killing her office workers. Janice tries quickly to rearrange her uncomfortable mask of sanity while her mother figure, wearing a clear plas-

tic mask of insanity, is presented as an aloof, disguised and faceless figure. Janice's slipping off the mask of reality causes her to lose her job.

In a scene with her police officer brother, Jimmy (Ryan Barry), Janice confesses that she has not been to see her father recently because he is exhibiting signs of early Alzheimer's. Her guilt and self-deprecation are relatable. She feels that since he does not remember when she visits or calls, why bother? Compounding the situation is a birthday card from Janice's schizophrenic mother, whom she has not seen in 20 years, that sets off visions and hallucinations of the faceless mother.

Janice, haunted by her schizophrenic mother (ironically named Theresa and played by Susan Louise O'Connor), is both obsessed and repulsed by the woman. As the story unfolds, the audience learns Theresa had a breakdown years ago and committed horrible acts against her family. Janice, metaphysically drowning in the banality of everyday life, tries to swim against the current of conventionality. When she goes for job interviews with a man named Robert and then another named William (both played by Daniel Pellicano),

she can't quite fit the pigeon-hole mold that interviewers expect of her. When she interacts with others, it is an anxiety-laced experience fraught with hurdles that she is not capable of clearing.

One night Janice calls superintendent Paul (Eddie Borojevich) at her New York apartment building to have him fix a leaky radiator. Neither of the two is good at relationships. He has returned from war in the Middle East and hides from facing reality in this nondescript job. A back story of the super reveals that Paul feels, "I'm just a replaceable part." Later, when Janice makes an unexpected visit to his apartment that is messy, he tells her, "It's a snapshot of my soul." An awkward set of circumstances unfolds in which each character learns more about the other's ghosts.

When Janice finally goes to see her father, Michael (Daren Kelly), she finds that her image of him at age 42 is sorely different from the aging, forgetful, angry man of 20 years later. They seemingly have little in common. The dad was a marine and a police officer and still has a commanding voice. That booming set of pipes belies the weakness he has of a healthy relationship with his son or daughter.

Through medical testing, Janice could find out if she possesses the same gene that would diagnose her with her mother's malady. Does she want to know, at age 32, what her future brings? Would you?

First rate direction and acting bring this new work to life. Ms. Staats in the title role is hauntingly credible, especially in the scenes with Daniel Pellicano, who convincingly plays two opposite types of employers. Mr. Borojevich provides a sympathetic figure as the handsome superintendent. Ms. O'Connor's playful use of vocal variations is, at times, delightfully scary. The strained relationship between father and son - played exquisitely by Mr. Kelly and Mr. Barry - is sadly all too familiar.

Much of the play takes place in Janice's imagination. Terrific projections from set designer Caite Hevner Kemp help to create that world of the main character's mind. Vivid aquamarine projections dance for the under-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19



Photo courtesy of Mike Peters

CLEARING AWAY COBWEBS...Daren Kelly as Michael tries to talk to his daughter, Janice (Amy Staats), in Premiere Stages' 2014 Play Festival Winner, *Janice Underwater*. The comedy-drama that deals with failed relationships opened this past weekend and ushers in the Kean University-based professional theatre group's 10th anniversary.

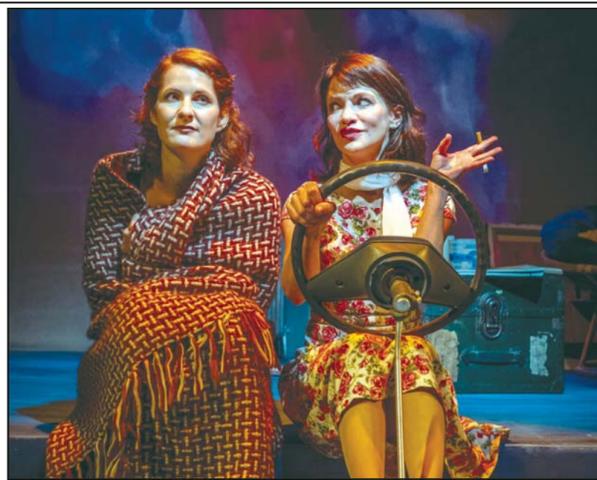


Photo courtesy of Mike Peters

BUNDLED IN MEMORIES... Mother and daughter (Amy Staats as Janice and Susan Louise O'Connor as Theresa) re-inact one of Janice's flashbacks. The 90-minute play *Janice Underwater* by Tom Matthew Wolfe is presented without intermission in the Zella Fry Theatre at Kean University by Premiere Stages.

Alliance Repertory Theatre

Announces Cast for *Five Flights*

SUMMIT — Award Winning Theatre Company, Alliance Repertory Theatre Company, has announced the cast for its season opening fall comedy Adam Bock's *Five Flights*.

The cast and crew include Alliance Company members: Brad Howell, Kelly Maizenaski and Gus Ibranyi. Additional cast includes: Heidi Hart, Alexandra Landau and Louis Vetter. Directed by Michael Driscoll, Choreography by Rachel Brown. Sound by Brad Howell and Michael Driscoll. Lighting by Ed Pearson. Set by William Biach and Stage Manager, Melanie Randall.

The story of siblings, Ed and Adele, who inherit an enormous aviary that their late father built for his deceased wife. Their father believed that her soul had transformed into the body of a wren. They are now faced with the dilemma of what to do with the crumbling structure. Sister-in-law Jane wants to build tidy houses; friend Olivia wants to build a church honoring birds and the Fifth Day of Creation; Ed just wants it to crumble to the ground. Folded into this quirky comedy are debates about religious conviction, fear of commitment and the way Russian ballet resembles a hockey game.

Alliance Rep's Artistic Director and *Five Flights* Director Michael Driscoll, stated, "We are very happy to be in such a vibrant town as Summit and hope to continue to produce outstanding theater to its inhabitants as well as the surrounding communities. *Five Flights*

is a perfect example of the type of shows we are known for-unique, challenging, and thought-provoking theater that entertains."

Five Flights will open on Friday, September 19, and run through Saturday, October 4, at MONDO, 426 Springfield Avenue, Summit. Performances are Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m. There is also a matinee on Saturday, September 28, at 2 p.m. and a Thursday, October 2, show at 8 p.m.

Tickets are \$24 for adults and \$19 for seniors, \$15 for students (must present school ID) For reservations, visit www.alliancerep.org/ or call (908) 472-1502.



The Choral Art Society

Choral Art Society

Announces New Season

WESTFIELD — The Choral Art Society of New Jersey recently began rehearsals for its 53rd concert season. Music Director Martin A. Sedek has prepared an exciting and innovative roster of choral works to be performed in January 2015 and May 2015.

The January 25, 2015 concert will be a celebration of works for choir and organ with its centerpiece the beautifully majestic "Messe Solennelle" by Louis Vierne. Also on the program will be works by Brahms, Faure, Gardiner, and Mendelssohn.

On May 2, 2015 the choir will be joined by a full string orchestra in presenting "Viva Vivaldi" a tribute to Vivaldi, with Vivaldi's "Gloria," as well as the world premier of Martin A. Sedek's "Four Seasons Cantata." The cantata's texts are the choral settings of Vivaldi's own sonnets that inspired his "Four Seasons."

Members of the Choral Art Society hail from Union, Somerset, Bergen, Hudson, and Middlesex counties. Music Director Martin Sedek is on the choral and theory faculties at Montclair State University's Cali School of Music, where he serves as Assistant Conductor for the choral program and is Visiting Professor of Music Theory and Conducting. He is an award winning composer of choral and orchestral music, sings professionally throughout the NY/NJ area, and is a Ph.D candidate in music theory and composition at Rutgers University.

New singers are always welcome. Rehearsals are held on Tuesday evenings from 8 to 10 p.m. at The Presbyterian Church in Westfield, located at the corner of Mountain Avenue and East Broad Street, in Westfield.

For additional information visit www.casofnj.org, contact ralph@casofnj.org, or call (855) 946-7652.

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Tickets

\$75 | \$58 | \$48 | \$26 | students \$13

Saturday September 20 at 7pm

Ridge Performing Arts Center, Basking Ridge

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For tickets and information go to www.njfestivalorchestra.org
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The New Jersey Festival Orchestra is a premier symphony orchestra with a presence throughout the many cultural communities of New Jersey. Now in its 32nd season, with multiple performances each year, NJ Festival Orchestra, led by internationally acclaimed Music Director David Wroe, is viewed as one of the cultural jewels of the metropolitan area. Cited by the Star Ledger as "the leading professional freelance orchestra in NJ", the organization is also a multi-year recipient of the NJ Council on the Arts' highest award: a Citation of Excellence and designation as a Distinguished Arts Organization. In addition to an adventurous subscription season, popular concerts near and far, and a rousing New Year's Eve celebration, the NJ Festival Orchestra sponsors educational and music therapy programs throughout the state of New Jersey.

