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We Players forges a new era of art in the parks

By Lily Janiak

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Britt Lauer and John Steele, Jr. rehearse for **Midsummer of Love**, an outdoor site-specific adaptation of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on Strawberry Hill in Golden Gate Park on Thursday, June 1, 2017 in San Francisco, Calif.

Amy Osborne/Special to The Chronicle

Summitting Strawberry Hill in Golden Gate Park to get to an early We Players rehearsal for “Midsummer of Love,” you can feel the temperature drop, as if you’ve just passed an invisible line into a new climate. Here, moisture tends to collect on the ground, even though it’s totally dry just a few feet lower in your hike up the hill.

Actor Britt Lauer is prepared. “Midsummer” isn’t her first project with the outdoor, site-specific theater company. She’s brought “six layers.” But throughout the first hour of rehearsal, she’s not even wearing her socks yet. This weather, which might make a novice seek jacket and hat, “is neutral,” she says.

By the standards of past We Players shows, “Midsummer of Love” goes easy on the actor’s body. An adaptation of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” that coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love, the show doesn’t require actors to lie perfectly still for minutes on end in the freezing rain, as in one especially grueling performance of 2012’s “The Odyssey on Alma,” which took place aboard a 19th century schooner as it sailed the San Francisco Bay. Nor does it require them to camp for several months in makeshift bunk beds on Angel Island, as in “The Odyssey on Angel Island,” which staged other portions of the epic, also in 2012.

Yet even this less onerous show has its challenges, says actor and assistant director Nathaniel Justiniano, for whom “Midsummer” is his sixth We Players project. The play will be performed at both Strawberry Hill in Golden Gate Park and at Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area in El Sobrante throughout July. The latter, he thinks, “will be the most strenuous ask of a We Players audience since I’ve known We Players,” even more so than “The Odyssey on Angel Island,” which was five hours long with no real meal breaks. At Kennedy Grove, “the climb to get to where the show’s going to be taking place” is 25 minutes, with “a 65-degree, 75-degree incline at some points.” It’s tough even “for us spry, young actors,” he says.

Founding artistic director Ava Roy, who performs in and directs “Midsummer,” believes that asking more of audiences means they get more in return

“I think art should cost us something,” she says at Fort Mason Chapel, where part of We Players’ “Beowulf” was staged this spring.

Her audiences pay with their feet, she says. Their reward for all the walking is that they feel like Odysseus felt, that they re-enter the world with a sense of “Wow, I’ve really been through something.” For some audiences, of course, that can be too much. “Then you shut down, and you stop listening,” Roy says. “But there’s a sweet spot where if it’s just cold enough and you have to lean in to hear, maybe you’re listening more acutely.”

Staging classic plays in local, state and national parks might seem like an unlikely niche. But for Roy, “the thing that I’ve ended up doing that’s apparently so unusual in some ways is such an obvious and natural extension of me.”



Now 36, Roy grew up in rural western Massachusetts, on 5 acres of property. But if she had “zero neighbors” and spent a lot of time by herself in the woods, the region was also a “cultural mecca,” with the renowned Shakespeare and Company down the street and Tanglewood and Clark Art Institute nearby. Because of Shakespeare and Company’s involvement with schools, she estimates that she’d seen 30 Shakespeare plays by the time she graduated high school; she and peers even formed a theater company dedicated to Shakespeare, called Infamous Genius Theater Company.

Roy founded We Players in 2000 while still a student at Stanford, partly because Stanford’s arts offerings weren’t enough for her. “I kind of made We Players in reaction to the lack of what I had experienced in high school,” she says. If at first she felt the school was a “country club,” soon she started to ask herself, “Wait a minute, what if this is my playground? What if I turn this kind of immaculate backdrop into ... our stage and throw banners off the clock tower and tie bodies to the sculptures?”

We Players started working with the National Park Service in 2008, with a production of “Macbeth” at Fort Point (a script the company revisited in the same site, in 2013 and 2014). Some of the park officials who saw the show then approached her about future projects.

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Golden Gate National Recreation Area chief of interpretation and education Michele Gee, who's worked with Roy on the later "Macbeth" productions and on "Ondine at Sutro" in 2015, says that over the past five years, and especially with last year's centennial, the park system as a whole has been mounting a bigger effort to incorporate more art, and different kinds of art — in other words, not just landscape painting.

"Not just listen and hear but feel, I think that's what art does," she says over the phone. "It helps people feel a place." It helps visitors connect to a particular park's themes, be it political imprisonment on Alcatraz (where We Players performed "Hamlet"), military activity at Fort Point or the legacy of the Summer of Love at Golden Gate Park. It can also bring more and different audiences; "Hamlet on Alcatraz," for instance, gave locals a reason to visit a site usually dominated by tourists.

Roy believes that part of the reason We Players' partnership with parks has been so long and so fruitful is that each time she proposes a project, she endeavors to serve not just her show's needs, but also the park's. "I tend to pick places that totally overpower me, because I'm humbled by them," she says. "Like, 'Yes Fort Point, how can I serve you?' 'Dear Alcatraz, what would you like from me?'"

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Midsummer of Love: Written by William Shakespeare. Adapted and directed by Ava Roy. Through July 9 and July 27-30. \$30-\$80. Strawberry Hill, Golden Gate Park, S.F. July 15-23. Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area, El Sobrante.

www.weplayers.org

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