

ASBURY PARK PRESS

Much to remember, on stage in September



(Photo: courtesy of Laura Marie Duncan)

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Kurt Weill – that old life of the party – reminded us in no uncertain terms that “the days grow short when you reach September.” But for every back to school bargain in the store (and every hint of sweater-weather breeze beneath the door), there’s a Jersey Shore regular who can tell you that the onetime season of fall preview is actually prime time for enjoying the best of our hometown watering spots, natural attractions, and fabulously free and breathable beaches. The theater folk of our community are poised to “Step up in Sept” as well, with a set of post-Labor Day labors of love that range from musical evergreens, to new harvestings from our own local-organic playwrights.

Fall fashion Fellini, from La Strada

After having done things hermit-crab style in its earliest days, La Strada Ensemble Theater — the busy collective of playwrights and performers under the artistic direction of Toms River author A.J. Ciccotelli — has managed to stake out a home for itself, inside Ocean Grove’s Jersey Shore Arts Center. The reborn Neptune High School building at the corner of Main Street and Main Avenue has offered snug harbor for the various classes, readings and fully staged

works from the (astoundingly prolific) company — and, perhaps befitting an operation whose name evokes vintage Fellini, the grass-roots group has filled its appointed space with a carnival of colorful characters that promise to promenade on into the coming months, with the announcement of a new season that brings eight new productions from September to May 2017. On the slate for this month are a pair of never-before-seen originals — Ciccotelli's "explosive new drama about commonality, camaraderie and survival" known as "Fab and Ren," plus a double-header program of one-acts by LSET founding member Tom Cavanaugh that pairs "Poker Night" with "Last Remnants of Cops, Robbers and Hollywood Cowboys." Exact dates, showtimes and ticket details have yet to be announced for these events as we go to press, so visit www.lastradaensemble.org or call 732-455-2748 for updated info.

"Cheaper" With dessert, at First Ave

An in-demand actress on the Shore area community scene — one whose gallery of characters has folded in everything from sexy ingenues, to at least one memorable turn as a chimpanzee — Gina Shuster proved her mettle as a director (and an ace wrangler of large, family-style casts) with a Riddlesbrood production of "A Christmas Carol" at Lakewood's Strand Theater last year. The month of September sees the Toms River resident once more called upon to work her multi-generational mojo, with a family show that broke the mold: "Cheaper by the Dozen," the dramedy (adapted from the autobiographical book by Frank and Ernestine Gilbreth) that examines life in a 1920s family whose eminent efficiency-expert parents extrapolated their ideas to the management of a brood of twelve kids. The story that was memorably filmed with Clifton Webb and Myrna Loy is served up (with coffee and dessert) on the intimately scaled stage of First Avenue Playhouse in Atlantic Highlands, beginning today and continuing through the month of September, with full schedule details and reservations (\$22) available by calling 732-291-7552 or visiting www.firstavenueplayhouse.org.

In Like "Flint," in Asbury Park

Back for an encore stand at their new home — House of Independents, the eclectically quirky all-purpose artspace at the heart of Asbury Park's Cookman Avenue — Rich Quatrone's American Poetry Theater troupe returns with an all-original project ripped (screaming) from recent headlines. A collaboration between producer-director Quatrone and Renee Panagos-Felice, "The Bombing of Flint" examines the collision of political expediency and the public good, as it takes on the slow killing of a downtrodden American city in the name of the bottom line. Premiere performances take place at 8 p.m. on Sept. 11 and 12; tickets are \$15 general admission, and more information can be had by calling 732-822-4338 or visiting www.houseofindependents.com.

Coming up "Gypsy," at the Count Basie

An undisputed all-time-great musical of Broadway's golden age; one with a subject that might have popped a monocle or two in its day (the early showbiz life of world famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee) and a once-in-a-lifetime collaboration by songwriting partners Stephen Sondheim and Jule Styne — "Gypsy" hits the grand stage of Red Bank's Count Basie Theatre as the latest offering from resident semipro stage company Phoenix Productions. Set in that uncertain interval between the death of Vaudeville and the rise of Burlesque, the 1959 smash became a hardy perennial of community theater on its way to making songs like "Let Me Entertain You," "Together Wherever We Go" and "Everything's Coming Up Roses" part of America's cultural DNA. Phoenix co-founder Tom Martini directs a cast toplined by Loretta Boyle as ultimate stage mom Mama Rose, with Lily Grace Riddle and Kathryn Pentek as the child and grownup versions of Louise/Gypsy Rose, plus Ariana Pappas and Miranda Franco channeling two ages

of sister June. Performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. (plus Sundays at 3 p.m.) beginning September 16 and running through Sept. 25. Tickets (\$22 - \$32) available by calling the Basie box office at 732-842-9000 or visiting countbasietheatre.org.

A literary “Lion,” at Stone Church

It’s set in the 12th-century court of King Henry II, where the aging patriarch and the various warring factions of his family jockey for succession and parry for prominence with word and weapon. While it sounds like the stuff of the heaviest Shakespearean tragedy, James Goldman’s 1966 play “The Lion in Winter” is a bracingly witty ensemble piece that carries the contemporary energy of its time, and provides some regally meaty roles for actors that have included Peter O’Toole and Katharine Hepburn in the powerhouse film version. The play comes to the intimate but history-kissed environs of Middletown Township’s All Saints Memorial (the historic “Old Stone Church” at the junction of Navesink and Monmouth Avenues), in a production offered by the community Stone Church Players. CJ Nolan and Laura Casey star as Henry and Eleanor of Aquitaine, with Ankit Sharma, Abraham El Cantante Nava and Christopher J. Friedel co-starring in the show that opens on September 16 and continues through Sept. 25 with performances on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets (\$25) can be reserved by calling 732-226-6131.

“The Lion in Winter” returns to the local stage this November, in a major professional production from Two River Theater Company that stars Obie winner (as “Hamlet,” no less) and Tony nominee Michael Cumpsty as Henry II. It’s the latest in a series of Two River projects — as both actor and director — for the celebrated Shakespearean specialist and Broadway veteran, who will be making his first-ever appearance in an August Wilson show when TRTC presents the late great African American playwright’s 1984 drama “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” Directed by Tony winner Ruben Santiago-Hudson and co-starring Brandon J. Dirden (Broadway’s “All the Way;” TV’s “The Americans”), the season-opening production goes up in previews on September 10 and opens on September 16. Watch this space for more on “Ma Rainey,” and other offerings in the new 2016-17 season at Two River.

A fall preview “Post Mortem,” in Middletown

It’s the start of another season for the Shore area’s longest-running community stage troupe; a company whose current stewards weren’t even born when it put on its first show back in 1953. Picking up on the tone established by the recent summertime offering “An Evening with Thornton Wilder,” the Monmouth Players inaugurate an ambitious “Season of Classics” (a slate that will include Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” and Noel Coward’s “Private Lives”) with a tip of the deerstalker to the legacy of literature’s ever-popular World’s Greatest Detective. Written by Olivier Award winner Ken Ludwig, “Post Mortem” grafts the peculiar delights of the “old dark house” mystery onto a plot whose central figure is the real-life stage star William Gillette — the actor (famed for his seminal portrayal of Sherlock Holmes) who’s forced to find his inner detective when an outbreak of murder-most-foul occurs at his Connecticut castle. It’s all served with the Players’ superior spread of homemade desserts inside the beautifully renovated Navesink Arts Center (the former Navesink Library) in Middletown Township, beginning Sept. 17 and continuing through Oct. 2 with performances at 8:15 p.m. Saturdays (plus Friday 9:30) and 2 p.m. Sundays. Ticket reservations (\$20, with discounts for seniors, students and veterans), show dates and directions can be obtained by calling 732-291-9211 or visiting monmouthplayers.net.

A Tony Two-Timer, at APAC

She's bookended her mantel with twin Tonys, for her Best Leading Actress turns in a the retro musical romps "Thoroughly Modern Millie" (2002) and "Anything Goes" (2011). Her resume is further weighted with significant stints in such Broadway items as "The Drowsy Chaperone," "Little Women" and "Shrek." And, for one night only on Sept. 24, the Axelrod Performing Arts Center in Ocean Township has got her, for a gala "Evening with Sutton Foster" that teams the serial award winner and star of the TVLand series "Younger" with music director Michael Rafter for an 8 p.m. concert event that's preceded by a meet 'n greet cocktail reception. Tickets for the Saturday night special event are priced from \$65 to \$125 (with a \$180 VIP ticket including show plus reception), and can be purchased at the APAC website, www.axelrodartscenter.com.