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image

Spring 2025
vol.20 no.1 \$4.95**SHAKER BRIDGE
THEATRE**
THRIVING AT
BRIGGS OPERA HOUSE**REDCAN
RESTAURANT**
1920s VIBE,
GREAT FOOD

Reaching New Heights
at **THE NOTCH**



BY ANNE RICHTER ARNOLD ✧
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELI BURAKIAN



BIGGER AND BETTER IN WHITE RIVER JUNCTION

Shaker Bridge Theatre (SBT) is not your typical theater company. The creation of founder and Artistic Director Bill Coons, SBT's mission is to discover and create provocative, contemporary plays and to expand the boundaries of theater by presenting work that is compelling and innovative.

SBT is a recent addition to the arts hub of White River Junction, Vermont. In August 2023, SBT moved from Enfield, New Hampshire, to its new home in Briggs Opera House. The change to a new venue took SBT from a small local theater production company to a regional company in a historic theater, nestled in an artistic enclave.





“Attendance has been going up every year, while many theaters are experiencing the opposite. We are truly fortunate in that way. But I believe,” says Adrian, “it is because we are known for the quality of our productions. We are providing something unique that people want.”

A FANTASTIC LOCATION

SBT began accidentally. In 2006, Bill was set to retire after a lifetime in theater production and education and live on a sailboat. Fate had different plans, so when he met someone special and moved to the Upper Valley, he took on the challenge to transform a vacant space in Enfield into an 80-seat theater.

Fifteen years later, with many successful seasons behind him, Bill found SBT a new home at Briggs Opera House. SBT has a yearlong lease on Briggs and essentially runs the venue, renting it out to other organizations when no plays are in production.

"SBT has grown immensely over the last couple of years since the move to its new home. The move from Enfield was incredibly complicated, but worth it," says Bill. "We have been able to grow to seat three times as many people, as the capacity at Briggs is 240. Our audience numbers have gone up 82 percent. Our numbers are up because of the quality of what we do but also because we are in a fantastic location."



Above: Adrian and Bill share a laugh in the outer lobby.

Production credits: Photos by Caitlin Gomes Photography.

The Effect by Lucy Prebble featuring Haulston Mann and Sophia Grasso (2024/2025 season).

The Wickhams: Christmas at Pemberley by Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon featuring Isaac Hickox-Young and Dory Psomas (2024/2025 season).

The Thanksgiving Play by Larissa FastHorse featuring Laura Woyasz (2024/2025 season).

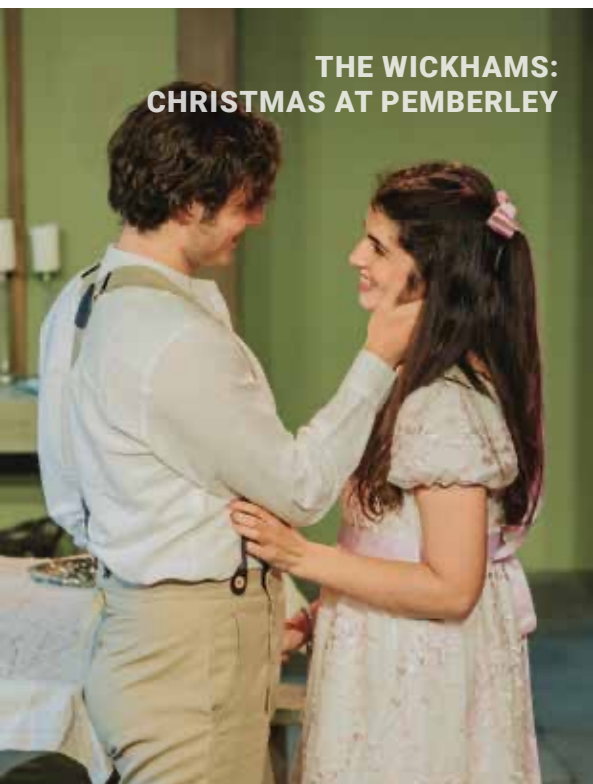
The Cake by Bekah Brunstetter featuring Stephanie Israelson and Heather Holmes (2022/2023 season).

Ironbound by Martyna Majok featuring Amy Hutchins and Tommy Crawford (2021/2022 season).

It's A Wonderful Life—The Radio Show by Joe Landry featuring Tim Rush and Susan Haefner (2022/2023 season).



**THE WICKHAMS:
CHRISTMAS AT PEMBERLEY**



THE CAKE



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Besides being able to seat a larger audience, one of the reasons for the move was that White River Junction has become a destination for the arts. In addition to Briggs Opera House, Northern Stage, and the Center for Cartoon Studies' Schulz Library, White River Junction boasts several restaurants, boutiques, galleries, and artists' studios.

"An important thing that has changed is that we are now in a little town that has a lot going on. WRJ has become a cultural hub," says Bill. "It feels like this is where everyone congregates for the arts. There is enough demand in this town to support two professional theaters. We really complement each other; we are not in competition because we are not doing the same kind of things."

A TALENTED TEAM

The biggest change for Bill is that he now has a staff. "I get to just be the artistic director. For the first 15 years, I did everything: box office, set building, lights, and producer as well as being the artistic director. At Briggs, we



SHAKER BRIDGE THEATRE'S 18TH SEASON (2025/2026)

SEMINAR

by Theresa Rebeck
 September 25 - October 12

DEAR JACK, DEAR LOUISE
 by Ken Ludwig
 December 4 - 21

FOOL FOR LOVE
 by Sam Shepard
 January 22 - February 8

have a stage manager, set designer, costume designer, box office manager, and freelancers who help with media and marketing. Most importantly, we have a managing director, Adrian Wattenmaker. It is wonderful to have a partner who knows what he is doing and has a great background. We are so lucky we have Adrian."

Adrian joined the SBT team in August 2024. "My better half and I wanted to move up to the area. SBT's compelling and provocative productions are right up my alley and like what I did in New York, so it is a perfect fit. It's a talented team and I feel fortunate to be collaborating with them."

A UNIQUE LINEUP

The 2024/2025 season is dedicated to women playwrights. It is the second time Bill has done this and part of his philosophy for SBT. "As of seven years ago, the number of plays written by women represented in regional theaters was only about 12 percent," says Bill. "In our first nine seasons, 25 percent of the



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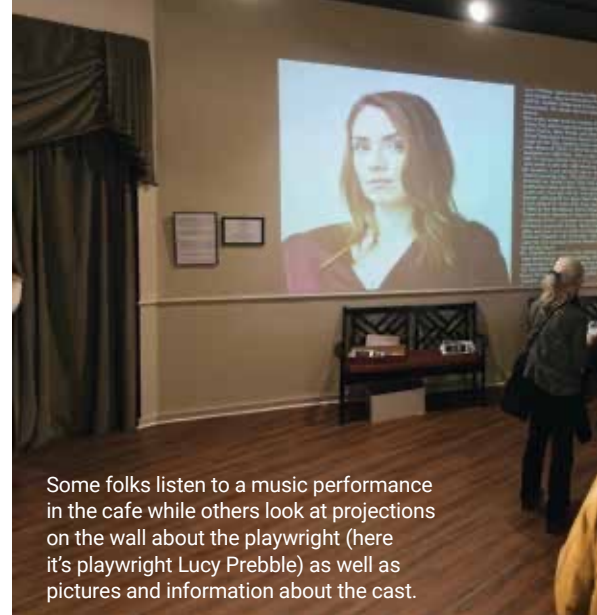
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Some folks listen to a music performance in the cafe while others look at projections on the wall about the playwright (here it's playwright Lucy Prebble) as well as pictures and information about the cast.

plays we produced were written by women. I decided there would be parity between men and women playwrights at SBT, so for example, five will be by men and five will be by women. We plan to keep presenting plays written by women and men in equal measure." The first three productions were *The Thanksgiving Play* by Larissa FastHorse, *The Wickhams: Christmas at Pemberley* by Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon, and *The Effect* by Lucy Prebble.

The spring production, *Maytag Virgin*, follows Alabama school teacher Lizzy Nash and her neighbor Jack Key over the year following the tragic death of Lizzy's husband. Both are in a transitional phase trying to let go of the past and are so consumed that neither is sure if they have a future. By southern playwright Audrey Cefaly, this modern love story will run May 8 to 25, 2025. It will feature director Jammie Patton from New York, the same woman who directed SBT's production of *The Cake* last season.

Another aspect of SBT is to bring plays by new playwrights to its audiences. "I've been told by a number of people that the business plan for this theater is crazy," says Bill. "We are doing plays almost no one has heard of and plays that are written by people almost no one has ever heard of. Something is obviously working, and it shows in the numbers. Season subscribers have nearly doubled in the last year, going against national trends."



He continues, "Attendance has been going up every year, while many theaters are experiencing the opposite. We are truly fortunate in that way. But I believe," says Adrian, "it is because we are known for the quality of our productions. We are providing something unique that people want."

LOOKING AHEAD

Next season SBT will be doing what they have done for the last 17 years, producing five main stage shows per season. Last season was the only season they produced four shows, but it has been a year of substantial changes. In addition to the five productions, Bill and Adrian are working on expanding programming to include new play development, a reading series, hosting guest artists, and educational programs.

"We want the audience to have a special experience when they're at SBT. In the lobby we have a small stage and cafe tables where they can listen to local musicians perform before the shows," says Adrian. "We are constantly looking for ways to expand the audience experience and we will have even more to offer in the next couple of years. There is much to look forward to with SBT." 🌟

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