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Dorset Theatre Festival: 2016 season transcends tried and true

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Staff Writer

Dina Janis, Dorset Theatre Festival's artistic director, just returned from New York where she was casting *The Norman Chronicles* with her counterparts at Weston Playhouse and White River Junction's Northern Stage. The three Vermont professional theaters have joined in a unique collaboration, each producing one of the plays in Alan Ayckbourn's comic trilogy. "It was so incredible to be in the same room with all three artistic directors, and all three directors," Janis said. "We saw some incredible actors. It's a bit of an adventure for everybody."

Ayckbourn's *Table Manners* is just one of the four main stage productions at the Dorset Theatre Festival that represent the company's forward thinking. *Dear Elizabeth*, Sarah Ruhl's tribute to poetry, the world premiere of Theresa Rebeck's *The Way Of The World*, and the Billie Holiday tribute *Lady Day At Emerson's Bar & Grill*, represent a new approach for the company. That change not only came from the artistic director's heart, but was supported by examining the audience's response to her successful and innovative five years in that position. "What was really great to find out for us in thinking forward for the festival, the plays that we have actually done the best with, in terms of audiences coming in from outside the region and box office demographics being diverse as well as robust, are the plays which are the closest to my heart," Janis said, "the current canon, things that are a bit more risky than I tried when I first came on."

So Janis dropped the formulaic programming — one silly comedy, one drama, one family show, one mystery, etc. — in favor of mixing the expected with the unexpected. "We decided to take a shot at approaching it a little differently," Janis said. "We'll see what happens. It takes guts — but we're forward motion this year."

Opening the season is *Table Manners* June 16-July 2. All three of *The Norman Chronicles* are set during the sexual revolution of the 1970s and take place over the same weekend at an English country estate. Each play takes place in a different part of the house with *Table Manners* in the dining room. "What I love about his work is that it's funny, but it really looks at marriage, it looks at relationships," Janis said. "It has a lot of bittersweet moments that are quite poignant." Northern Stage begins the trilogy with *Living Together* April 20-May 8, and Weston closes with *Round and Round the Garden* July 21-30. All three companies will share a cast and creative team, but with different directors. Dorset's will be helmed by Evan Yionoulis, who directed the recent revival of *Hapgood* at Williamstown Theatre Festival. "It's quite an adventure to collaborate with the designers and the various people in the creative process," Janis said. "Everyone is enjoying the fact that there is this different model. The actors are going to go from one production to another theater with another director and another, yet they'll be on the journey the whole time."

Ruhl's *Dear Elizabeth*, July 8- 23, chronicles the 30-year friendship between two of the most celebrated American poets of the 20th century, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. With postmarks from Maine to Key West, and as far away as London and South America, this is a lyrical and moving portrait of two lives that unfold in letters. Directed by Adrienne Campbell-Holt, the Dorset production will feature a rotating cast of Broadway actors. "What really drew me to it was that at the end of the day, the audience enters poetry," Janis said. "And that experience is so intimate, at times funny, very moving, but very unique. You're in the heart of what poetry actually is – which is pretty great. It's the kind of play actors love to do, because it's really meaty," Janis added.

The premiere of *The Way Of The World* is quite a coup for the festival. It doesn't hurt that Rebeck, a prolific Broadway playwright and novelist, is a part-time Dorset resident and frequent collaborator with the company. A contemporary retelling of the sardonic masterpiece by William Congreve, Rebeck sets the action in the demimonde of the hyper-rich Hamptons. The story follows a good-hearted heiress who has fallen prey to the attentions of an amoral party boy. Rebeck herself will direct the production. "It's a big piece, an eight-character play," Janis said. "It's quite a ride. It's really funny, and typically Rebeck tends to be a little edgy – and is." Other theaters have expressed an interest in producing the play after its Dorset premiere –

making the Vermont theater integral to the long-term future of the play. "It's so important to the play that you are actually able to put it up on its feet," Janis said. "Having the playwright in the room, she can really hear and listen to what happens when the audience enters the room – what's working and not working – and you're able to adjust what you are creating. You can't do that in any other way."

Finally, *Lady Day At Emerson's Bar & Grill* by Lanie Robertson, Aug. 18-Sept. 3, is a homecoming of sorts for Janis. "Both my parents were jazz players, and I grew up on the road," she said. "I was fortunate enough to have been on the road with people like Tony Bennett. Miles Davis was somebody I knew very well in my 20s. Jazz is a deep part of who I am." Robertson creates a look into the life and times of Holiday. The time is 1959, the place is a seedy bar in Philadelphia, and the audience is about to witness one of Billie's last performances, given four months before her death. "Her story was very important," said Janis. "She had already spent time in prison and was not able to play in clubs anymore because of being busted for drugs. The only place she could play in New York was Carnegie Hall."

Dorset, in addition to the four main stage productions, will present three works as part of its New Play Reading Series throughout the summer. Featuring both young and seasoned playwrights, it offers audiences an in-depth look into the early creative process of making a play come to life. All readings feature opportunities to speak with the playwright, director, and cast after the reading.

Dorset Theatre Festival

- June 16-July 2: "The Norman Conquests: Table Manners" by Alan Ayckbourn
- July 8-23: "Dear Elizabeth" by Sarah Ruhl
- July 28-Aug. 13: "The Way Of The World" (world premiere) by Theresa Rebeck
- Aug. 18-Sept. 3: "Lady Day At Emerson's Bar & Grill" by Lanie Robertson

Subscriptions and Flex Passes go on sale March 1. For information, call [802-867-2223](tel:802-867-2223), or go online to www.dorsettheatrefestival.org.



From Left to Right: Artistic Directors Dina Janis (Dorset Theatre Festival), Steve Stettler (Weston Playhouse), and Carol Dunne (Northern Stage)