

Playwrights Theatre of East Hampton Gets a Revival at LTV



The cast, director and producer of Aaron Posner's "Stupid F*cking Bird" during a recent read through at LTV Studios. The play will be staged at LTV as part of the new incarnation of the Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton. COURTESY JOSH GLADSTONE/LTV

Annette Hinkle on Jul 31, 2023

LTV Studios in Wainscott is a hive of creative activity these days, buzzing with all sorts of action — though not all of it related to the creation of public access television programming.

On a recent visit to LTV's Studio Three, which also functions as a black box theater, a group of four seasoned stage professionals — Josh Gladstone, Kate Mueth, Sawyer Spielberg and Raye Levine — gathered to work on a new production that will be offered this weekend in the space.

Welcome to Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton. If the name sounds familiar, it's because this incarnation is a redux of the beloved company that was started on the East End more than three decades ago and is now being revived, thanks to the efforts of Gladstone who recently joined LTV as a producer after having served as the artistic director of Guild Hall's John Drew Theater for two decades.

This story first began back in 1992, when Springs resident and producer Mitzi Pazer, of The Roundabout Theatre Company in Manhattan, and her husband, attorney Perry Pazer, founded the Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton. For 10 summers, the program operated out of LTV Studios before Gladstone lured the Pazers over to the John Drew Theater, where it enjoyed another 10 seasons of staged play readings.

"It had great audiences and responses at LTV," said Gladstone, recalling the popularity of the Pazers' series. "Then they came to Guild Hall and it was wildly successful with terrific talent."

The Pazers were well connected in the theater world and as a result, were able to get fabled names to grace the stage for their shows, including heavy hitters like Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, Judd Hirsch, Estelle Parsons, Dianne Wiest, Peter Boyle, Jack Klugman, Mercedes Ruehl, Tovah Feldshuh and Charles Durning, among others.

Though it's been more than a decade since the Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton last presented a show here — the Pazers left the East End and now live in Manhattan — given his rapport with the couple and his new role at LTV, Gladstone saw an opportunity.

So he called up the Pazers.

"I said, 'Hey there, I'm at LTV now and I'd like to bring Playwrights' Theatre back as a legacy project and let that thing sing again,'" said Gladstone. "They still have friends out here, Perry gave a generous gift to underwrite it. Their grandson, Spencer, is in the film and TV world and he wants to produce something under the family name."

But that will come later. To kick off the reincarnated series, Gladstone and the team will relaunch the Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton with a staged reading of "Stupid F*cking Bird," a play by Aaron Posner, this Thursday and Friday, August 3 and 4 at 8 p.m. on the black-box stage at LTV's Studio Three.

As was the case with the original Playwrights' Theatre, readings for the series are presented in conjunction with professionals working on plays via other theater companies, many of them located in New York City. That's the case with "Stupid F*cking Bird," which comes to LTV in association with Spielberg and his wife, Levine, and their Where Are They Going Theatre Company.

"Raye and I started the theater company in 2017," explained Spielberg as he, Levine, Gladstone and Mueth gathered around a work table in Studio Three. "We're Brooklyn-based but we don't have a space. My buddy, Will Sturek brought me this play and said, 'Have a read.'"

"I was laughing. It's both sad and funny and dark and tragic, but also real," Spielberg continued. "I called Will and said, 'Let's do it.' And then Josh got involved. We had a nice catch up, he said, 'I have this gig, what about a staged reading at LTV?' I asked Will and Raye and it was an easy 'Yes.'"

Sturek will be among the actors joining the cast, which, in addition to Spielberg, Levine and Mueth, will include Joe Pallister, Jessica Mortellaro and Ed Kassar. Heen Sasithorn Sturek, Will Sturek's wife, will direct the play, which is an adaptation of Chekhov's masterpiece "The Seagull."

"We did a table read here, it felt so right," said Spielberg. "We've all worked with each other and know each other through the community."

"Stupid F*cking Bird," an irreverent, contemporary and humorous remix of Chekhov's "The Seagull," tells the story of an aspiring young director's rampage against the art created by his mother's generation, a nubile young actress's rivalry with an aging Hollywood star for the affections of a renowned novelist, and everyone's discovery of just how surprising love, art and growing-up can be.

Posner's reimagining of "The Seagull," which is a fairly new play that has been produced just a few times, stages timeless battles between young and old as well as past and present, in search of the true meaning of life. The reading will feature original songs composed by James Sugg designed to bring to the surface the famously subtextual inner thoughts of Chekhov's characters.

This production, a work in progress, will be presented as a staged reading, which means audience members can expect to see scripts in hand, along with basic lighting, sound and technical elements, as well as a couple of props.

"That's what Playwrights' Theatre was, working in development with active producers and actors," Gladstone explained. "It's set at a summer home, but it breaks the fourth wall and messes with the audience. It's written with humor and there's music that will be performed by Jessica, who plays the mandolin."

Though it's not necessary to be intimately familiar with "The Seagull" to appreciate "Stupid F*cking Bird," Mueth notes that the audience will mine the content deeper if they come to the show knowing Chekov's work.

"What the play does so well is tap into underlying currents of every single relationship, all the recovery moments, all the complicated relationships you have in a lifetime," Spielberg explained. "Mother /son; lovers/ friends; husband/wife; unrequited love; people jealous of you; people you've wished to be more like; people who make you laugh; a wise man with a lot to teach who is ignored; the rising star and dying star."

"It taps into the cycle of relationships," added Levine. "It's also universal, because when you look at the theater, these are representations of roles we all fill or play. It's about the lust for life, the world is your oyster and then you realize there's a lot of pain and struggle and it's not so easy."

"Posner is a genius because he activates the audience," Mueth offered. "The thing I came away with, he illuminates the questions of being here in a theater. Afterward, you're gonna start scrolling again, no matter how much we care about arts. We can't change anything in the world. We do this because we want to change the world for the better."

"Through the play each character finds a moment of acceptance of the reality, who they are, who the people are around them," said Spielberg. "That moment of acceptance allows the audience and actors to drop in and breathe a little bit."

"They're talking seriously, but it's funny," he added. "The comedy comes from the ridiculous drama of it all. It's grounded in dark humor and when I first read it, it reminded me of Monty Python."

It turns out that this is an especially fortuitous time to revive the Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton, given that with the SAG-AFTRA actors and writers now out on strike, film and television work is virtually nonexistent for union actors.

"SAG is on strike," said Levine. "So into the theater we go."

It's also something of a family affair, as several of those involved with the production are fairly new parents.

"We're moms and dads coming back to the theater," said Spielberg, who has two young children with Levine, Fynn, age three, and Callum, who is just a year old. "Will Sturek and Heen had a son when my wife and I had a baby."

Gladstone jumped in to emphasize the family ties in this production — more specifically, the couple connection.

"How nice that the Pazers, Mitzi and Perry, husband and wife, have created an enduring legacy, as they did with Playwrights' Theatre," he said. "Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson often were at the center of those projects. Cut to now, Kate and I are a couple and love working together, Raye and Sawyer are a young couple and Will and Heen love working together."

"These lovely relationships are about more than a paycheck, we enjoy working with each other."

The group has worked together several times before, including in various productions at Guild Hall and for Neo-Political Cowgirls, Mueth's performance-based organization. In 2017, Gabe McKinley's play "Extinction" was directed by Gladstone in a run at the John Drew Theater. The four-character cast included Spielberg and Levine and was brought to Gladstone by Spielberg as a work in progress in 2016.

"You don't have to cut through the bullshit," said Mueth of the group's longtime working relationship. "We have gone through tough times together. It's rare to have people show up when they know how hard it is and there are no riches to gain. We're coming together with great humans."

That chemistry and camaraderie is likely to be on full display in "Stupid F*cking Bird," and it's a collaboration the group hopes will only grow as The Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton forges ahead in the years to come.

"The moments are so well written and when we sat down, we were able to tap into it because we had those relationships," said Spielberg of Posner's script. "We're doing two performances, this may ignite another collaboration."

"I would like to continue working on this and other plays as well and I think it's the beginning of a great adventure," he added. "There are a lot of possibilities."

Playwrights' Theatre of East Hampton presents "Stupid F*cking Bird" by Aaron Posner on Thursday and Friday, August 3 and 4, at 8 p.m. at LTV's Studio Three. Tickets are \$30 in advance (\$35 at the door) with VIP front-row café tables available for \$75 at ltveh.org. LTV Studios are at 75 Industrial Road, Wainscott. Call 631-537-2777 for more details.

The series continues with "Before Vinson," the offbeat new comedy by New York City playwright Michael C. O'Day, on September 16; followed by a two-week run of David Mamet's early comedy "The Duck Variations" directed by LTV's Carlos Garcia from October 6 to 15; concluding October 21 with a concert staging of the new romance "A Milonga for Gabriel Isaacs" by Wainscott-based author John McCaffrey and his writing partner, Adam Singer, accompanied by live music and dance performed by Sandra Antognazzi's Tango Fusion company.