

Insider

Changes are rippling across the Boston area's small and midsize theater scene in the form of new leadership, a new venue, and more active conversations around diversity, equity, and theater's role in the cultural conversation.

"No art form should become stuck," says Harold Steward, who, with Evelyn Francis, shares producing co-executive director responsibilities at The Theater Offensive. "We are a social justice organization committed to creating and presenting theater that moves people to action. We need to be agile as we think about what that aesthetic looks like."

In Watertown, Michael J. Bobbitt, New Repertory Theatre's new artistic director, says he's continuing the company's mission of presenting plays that "speak powerfully to the vital ideas of our time," but he wants to make sure those productions both entertain and provoke conversations.

"I want to think more broadly about how we educate and get audiences excited about coming to the theater," Bobbitt says. "Are we a civic center for theater? How can we encourage opportunities for audiences to 'talk about' rather than just 'talk back'?"

In Concord, Umbrella Stage Company producing artistic director Brian Boruta says the former community theater's step up to professional-theater status with a new 344-seat proscenium-style main stage and a flexible 80- to 100-seat black box will not change the theater's commitment to plays and musicals that are a little bit outside the box.

"Our audience demographic has leaned more toward young professionals and young parents who want a night out, so we don't usually mount productions of the classics," says Boruta. "With the opening of the new spaces in September, we want to balance a bit of spectacle with more intimate shows, and for the first time, reach out to families."

While many local theater artists are impatient for change, all four of the leaders interviewed said listening will be as important as acting this year.

Steward says The Theater Offensive has been in the midst of changes for the past two years, as founding artistic director Abe Rybeck prepared to step down after 30 years.

"We have to be intentional about who we want to be," says Steward. "For 25 years we've been serving the LG-BTQ community. It's critical at this moment that we serve as a cultural contributor and organizer attached to



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STAGES | TERRY BYRNE

A spotlight on change in the local theater scene

community work."

The Theater Offensive will continue to work closely with communities on its award-winning True Colors program and will produce "Water in the Basement," a play about racism and political violence (Oct. 17-20). Although the company has moved away from its high-profile Out on the Edge Festival, Francis says that work has just become more embedded in communities rather than traditional theater spaces. That shift has highlighted new needs.

"Many of the individuals who participate in our True Colors work are eager to invite younger people to participate," says Francis. "Our programs cur-

rently support youth ages 14-22, while other programs go up to age 29, but new programs might reach children ages 10-12. I'm so impressed that the teens are eager to train each other and support each other with creative expression."

At New Rep, Bobbitt says he is starting with an inside-out approach to being more inclusive, starting with the theater company's job descriptions.

"I love the universality of theater, and its ability to chronicle the human experience," he says, "but I'm also obsessed with embracing more artists and audiences who look like me."

New Rep's season was jointly pro-

grammed by outgoing artistic director Jim Petosa and Bobbitt; it includes the two-hander "Nixon's Nixon," the musicals "Oliver" and "Hair," August Wilson's "Fences," "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill," and the regional premiere of "Trayf," a play exploring faith and friendship in the Hasidic community.

Bobbitt says he's also committed to finding creative ways to involve the community earlier in the creative process, so that "by the time we get to the performance, audiences are deeply connected to what they see on stage."

Although in the 12 years he spent leading Adventure Theatre-MTC in Washington, D.C., Bobbitt produced

32 new works, he says the Next Voices program, which selected a small group of local playwrights to develop new work, will remain on hold this season.

"I'm trying to see as much theater around town and meet as many people in the community as I can," he says. "I built my career on merging art and commerce, and I want to make sure I'm drawing on the imagination and creativity of an inclusive group of colleagues, so I don't act in a vacuum."

Boruta, at Umbrella Stage in Concord, says the company has a three-year plan with Equity (the union of actors, directors, and designers) to make sure they take the time to get to know both the professional theater community and a broader audience base.

"We are opening the new space with '42nd Street,'" says Boruta, "because that show is such a pure celebration of theater and the people who make it happen. It will allow everyone who has been supporting the \$20M building campaign over the past seven years to see what they donated to."

The rest of Umbrella Stage's mix includes "Fences," "Tuck Everlasting" ("our first family-friendly production," Boruta says), the regional premiere of a new folk-punk musical "Hundred Days," and the dueling divas musical "War Paint," starring Boston favorites Leigh Barrett and Shana Dirik.

This time of transition promises to usher in an exciting new wave of theatrical experiences in the Boston area.

Kudos to local high school songwriter

Tessa Barcelo, a rising high school sophomore at Andover High School, is one of six regional winners in the National Endowment for the Arts' annual Musical Theater Songwriting Challenge. In Barcelo's song "Queen," the queen of the mermaids reminds a young mermaid to embrace who she is and do what she must. "Queen" was chosen from nearly 170 applications submitted nationwide. Produced in partnership with the American Theater Wing (producer of the Tony Awards), the Songwriting Challenge will pair Barcelo and the other finalists with a professional theater songwriter and music director for a mentorship that will result in a Broadway-stage-ready original composition, as well as publication in a songbook from program partner Samuel French. Recordings of the songs will also be produced featuring Broadway performers and musicians.

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Photography shaped from color and abstraction

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

"Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet," wrote painter Paul Klee. And photography is the place where imagination meets reality.

FRANCO FONTANA: TRUE COLOR
At Robert Klein Gallery, 38 Newbury St., through Aug. 16. 617-267-7997, www.roberkleingallery.com

Fontana finds and frames shapes in the landscape so spare and orderly his photographs lean into abstraction. Color sets them ablaze.

A pale green architectural urn anchors "Los Angeles." It sits atop a fluted wall. Everything behind it appears flat: Sloping white ornamentation over red brick, a yellow rectangle of wall, an angled chunk of deep sky. The space feels claustrophobic until you notice a black splinter of a palm tree perching beside the urn. But it's no miniature — its scale tells us how far off it is. Distance explodes.

"Venice, Los Angeles," another sequence of layered shapes, has the pure



PROVENANCE: STUDIO OF FRANCO FONTANA

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geometry of a Kazimir Malevich painting. It's buildings, all planes and angles, accented with green and red. Even the shadows the photographer captures here don't seem to model volume; rather, they're small black flats. The Italian photographer frames what he sees as rhythms, and the colors play over us like melodies.

In more recent photos such as "Torino," he follows Aaron Siskind's lead and finds lyricism looking down at tar and asphalt. Fontana, of course, adds color — bands of painted red and white play backdrop to a lit seam of black tar.

Photographs by Franco Fontana (clockwise from top left): "Los Angeles"; "Venice, Los Angeles"; "Puglia"; and "Basilicata."

Sure, you might say, it's easy to find geometric abstraction in a city — but the countryside? Fontana's rural scenes look like distillations. In "Puglia," yellow incandescence beneath a black horizon line swelling with a low hill. Two white clouds are stacked perfectly above that rise in the sapphire sky. In "Basilicata," tilled and cultivated ribbons of earth unfurl like arranged ribbons.

How form, space, and color affect the eye is the essence of abstraction. Fontana's sensitivity to it imbues his photographs with the import of symbol and iconography. He turns the real world into a metaphysical one drenched in blues, yellows, and greens.

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ALBUM REVIEW

On 'Immunity,' Clairo takes pop in a fresh direction

By Chris Triunfo
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Despite her rising stardom, Claire Cottrill has struggled to separate herself from the do-it-yourself bedroom pop label critics gave her in the summer of 2017. That year found Cottrill, now known as Clairo, stuck at home in Carlisle, making a video of herself sitting in bed singing and dancing along to her song "Pretty Girl."

The video became an instant hit and has since amassed more than 37 million views. Minimal, twinkly synths push the track forward, but it's Cottrill's lyrics that make the song so appealing. An eloquent exploration of teenage emotions, it conveys conflicting thoughts on love, heartbreak, and self-worth.

For the past two years, the singer has been shaking bedroom pop off her back. Now with her debut album, "Immunity," Clairo has found her sound, one more elaborate and fitting for the lyrical prowess that made "Pretty Girl" such a hit.

The album hits a gorgeous peak with the fifth song, "Bags." It features an acoustic guitar, an upbeat percussion line, and strikingly sad lyrics. "Can you see me using everything to hold back? / I guess this could be worse / Walking out the door with your bags," Clairo sings. The production follows her narrative, rising and falling with an energy that is perfectly in sync with her hushed singing.

This is the work of producer Rostam Batmanglij, who is primarily known for his work with Vampire Weekend (on "Impossible," listeners will hear an organ sequence that echoes the strings in Vampire Weekend's 2008 hit "M79"). Clairo's songs once depended so much on her use of words, and with this album the production has risen to that same level, demanding the listener's attention. Fans will hear trap-inspired autotuned anthems like "Closer to You" beside poignant piano ballads like the Massachusetts-inspired "Alewife," or even a children's choir, featured heavily in the album's final song, "I Wouldn't Ask You."

Clairo is only 20 years old, and she has a lot to say about what she's seen so far. That can't all be constrained to bedroom pop. With the help of Batmanglij, it can take contemporary pop in new directions.

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