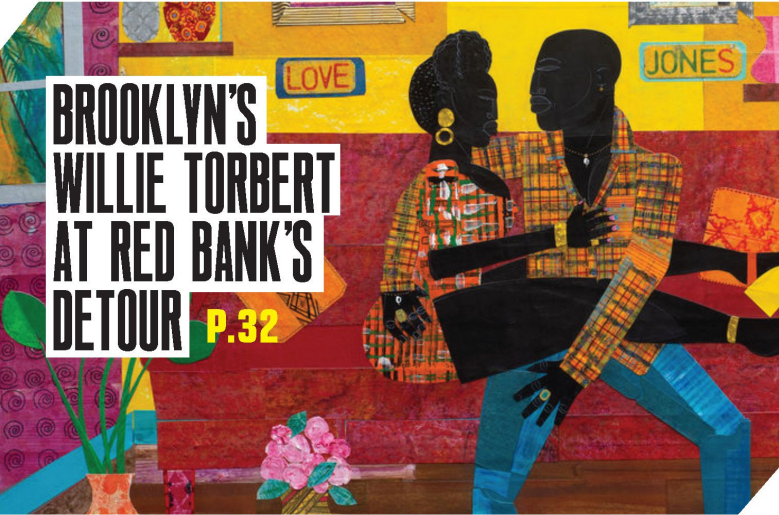


triCityNews

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AN IMPORTANT RED BANK CULTURAL ASSET POWERS THROUGH

**TWO RIVER THEATER LOOKS AHEAD
TO "DO WHAT WE DO BEST"**

RED BANK — Not counting the current interruption brought on by the plague, Red Bank's destiny is to become a cultural center for the region. And by that we mean the northeast.

There is a remarkably large creative class of people there, both living and working. The business leaders are creatives themselves, or they appreciate arts and culture and know how to support the mission. There's beautiful architecture and a beautiful river to inspire. And there's a rail link of only one hour to New York city.

Perhaps most importantly, there's the main cultural assets of Red Bank — the trio of venues that we often cite that's unusual for a town this size: The Count Basie Center for the Arts, the former BowTie art house cinema (now taken over by the Basie) and the Two River Theater.

A major narrative in these pages today is how cultural leaders and institutions are navigating Covid and what things will look like on the other side. A couple weeks ago, we reported about the gutsy move by the Basie to take over the BowTie art house movie theater, which BowTie cinemas had decided to vacate. Fortunately, the Basie has a board member — Tom Bernard, an area native and truly a giant in the independent film industry — who we expect to help guide them in developing this movie theater into a force. The Basie plans to open the cinema next month.

Meanwhile, the Basie and the Two River Theater remain closed. The Covid limitations don't allow enough seats to be sold to support the



**Two River Theater Managing
Director Michael Hurst**

performances, and the public has to be willing to come back. Both institutions in the meantime continue on, using virtual offerings and other measures to keep in front of their public, and even to expand their reach.

With that introduction, this week we turn to how the Two River Theater is navigating all this. Understand the role of the TRT in Red Bank and the region. They produce live and original theater, with a large creative team — directors, actors and backstage support. That's a lot of creative jobs for people who live here, as well as introducing actors and others to our region who come to perform.

Beyond that, the TRT is important in its other programming, such as providing youth education as well as its Crossing Borders festival which promotes live theater from Latinx theater artists. In addition, with Red Bank's T. Fortune Foundation, the theater is holding a four-part professional development workshop for teachers in "The ART of social justice."

And, of course, the Two River Theater is of such great importance in its physical presence — a beautiful piece of contemporary architecture that sets a dramatic sense of place for Red Bank. Its landmark status is something that should not be underestimated. Its recent expansion has

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made the theater even more of a physical force — the front plaza has been improved with a pergola that will allow live theater, something that may take on added importance in the Spring, depending on the status of the pandemic.

The theater is led by Managing Director Michael Hurst on the administrative side and Artistic Director John Dias on the creative side. The two have an impressive background in live theater, and the quality of their leadership is what you'd find in much larger cities — in fact, they both worked in New York for years before the TRT fortunately lured them down here.

“We all cannot wait to get back into the theater to do what we do best,” Hurst said. “Theater is such a collaborative art form. It's about being in person with one another.”

And that, of course, is the challenge for live theater. It's tough enough for a movie theater to reopen. It's much tougher for a live music venue like the Basie to reopen with musicians and back of the house operations during performances. But it strikes us that the toughest to reopen is live theater, with not only the live performers but even more intensive back of the house operations involving rehearsals, set design, costumes, etc.

Of course, the Two River Theater will be back. That's not an issue. Meanwhile, the full-time professional staff has continued on, working as hard as possible through social media and virtual offerings to keep the theater front and center in people's consciousness.

“We are being financially responsible,” said Hurst of the measures taken to deal with the pandemic. “The Two River Theater is going to be here when it's all said and done.”

Fortunately, the federal Paycheck Protection Plan monies helped keep the full-time staff going. Unfortunately, the part-time production staff can't be brought back without performances.

Meanwhile, the decision and planning on when to reopen involves a complex set of factors, especially because of the involvement of so many people with a live theater production.

“All the scenarios based on benchmarks are constantly evolving for us,” said Hurst. “If it's this scenario, what does that budget look like? There's a scenario in January. There's a spring scenario now that there's an outdoor plaza. The pergola was added for outdoor programming. This could be useful in the spring. So what does that scenario look like? These situations all have budgets that are ever evolving.”

Right now, the theater could legally open with 25 percent seating which is 80 seats in the Rechnitz theater. But that doesn't work. “To produce a show with 80 people is not economically viable,” Hurst said.

Of course, people have to feel comfortable coming back. Based on the national surveys, it doesn't appear patrons are yet ready to return to live indoor theater, he said. And there's the safety

issue of all those involved in a production.

“We're different than a movie theater or potentially other venues where we also have to figure out how all those actors are rehearsing safely,” Hurst said. “And how all the backstage crew is supporting the show safely in what's usually tight quarters. The actors, director and designers are all represented by unions which are heavily involved in signing off on safety plans nationally. So far, for example, the actors union has not signed off on many.”

Of course, pandemics don't last forever.

And triCity has a sense that because of the immensely personal nature of live theater — it is unique — its fans will come back in force when venues like the Two River Theater reopen. In that regard the future will be bright. It's hard to picture live theater fans discovering something they liked better during the pandemic as a substitute for the experience of live actors in front of them in an intimate setting like the Two River Theater. You simply can't replace it.

Hurst and his team have been working hard since the pandemic hit. Here's a summary of what they've been doing. Visit tworivertheater.org for more information:

TWO RIVER RISING – An Online Benefit Reading Series:

A Reading Series that reflects the past, present and future of the theater's diverse range of programming including reimagined classics and world premieres by the industry's most adventurous theater artists. The series started in July and the final event will be Romeo and Juliet with Act One on Sept. 30 and Act Two with a Q&A on Oct. 1.

Donation Match & Tickets:

All donations made to Two River Theater in support of the Two River Rising series will be matched by a generous donor to benefit five organizations with a pressing need due to the impact of systemic racism and COVID-19. Benefiting organizations are identified by the playwrights and directors involved in each reading and include: The Actors Fund, The Audre Lorde Project, The New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice, and The Ruben Santiago-Hudson Fine Arts Learning Center.

Online benefit event tickets are \$25 per reading and include access to live post-reading Q&As with the artists involved, hosted on Zoom.

Final Reading:

Romeo & Juliet on 9/30 and 10/1. A modern verse translation of the Shakespeare classic by South Korean playwright, Hansol Jung, produced in partnership with NAATCO (National Asian American Theatre Company).

#SceneAtTwoRiver:

Two River Theater's #SceneAtTwoRiver digital content series has been going strong since mid-March. The series consists of mostly video content including artist songs and monologues, behind-the-scenes interviews with staff on costume, set and lighting design, at-home activities

and crafts for students and families, self-care exercises led by teaching artists and a wide range of live virtual readings, classes and events.

The TRT has been able to remain engaged with local, national and worldwide theater fans digitally during Covid-19 as follows (data through 9/1): 140,000+ have viewed their YouTube video content. 34,000+ have clicked on their 213+ Facebook posts. 32,000+ have engaged with their 136+ Instagram posts. 26,000+ have visited Two River Theater's website viewing over 100,000 pages. 730+ have engaged with their 151 Twitter posts.

EDUCATION:

Summer Intensives:

Young theater people from around the nation entering grades 7-12 joined TRT's Online Summer Classes in July – “Summer Intensives”. The students worked with dedicated teaching artists (also scattered across the country,) learning about costume rendering, scenic and lighting design, acting and directing, songwriting, and created an online performance in five days.

The Art of Social Justice:

The Two River Education department in collaboration with Red Bank's T. Thomas Fortune Foundation and in compliance with the New Jersey Amistad Commission is offering a four-part series of professional development workshops for teachers entitled “The ART of Social Justice.” One of the fundamental principles of social justice education is the principle of honest, open dialogue. The first workshop, “Justice and Reconciliation: Conversations Beyond Conflict” was hosted via Zoom on Wednesday, August 19 by Dr. Walter Greason of Monmouth University. It offered a chance for teachers and community leaders to explore their feelings about the current moment, while providing a range of tools to facilitate these conversations with students. The series will continue with workshops in November, February and May, offering a range of topics focusing on how art and social justice work intersect.

CENTER FOR NEW WORK EDUCATION & DESIGN:

In late December 2019, TRT opened its new Center for New Work, Education and Design, a three-story facility that has been in development since 2011. The Center is connected to the TRT's permanent home, and includes two rehearsal studios, expanded scenery, prop and costume shops, offices and writing spaces for artists, centrally located offices for the theater's education and production departments, and multiple storage areas.

In addition to enhancing the work of its production department, the new building will allow the theater to expand the reach and impact of its education programs and free community events that it offers through the Inside Two River program. The Center will also allow TRT to expand the ambition and reach of its current efforts in support of new work, including artist residencies, retreats, readings, workshops, and collaborations with other theaters and artists engaged in new-play development.