

Local groups present at Philly Fringe

BY KATHY LAUER-WILLIAMS OF THE MORNING CALL



FRINGEARTS/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Allentown Public Theatre presents
'Then Athena' at the Philadelphia
Fringe Festival. The show explores the
perception of women and valor.



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Basement Poetry presents 'Her: The Female Experience from Birth to Death' at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival.



BARRY D. KIRSCH

Zach Trebino and Jenni Messner of Goatpig Theatre present 'Story of My Eye,' an adventure about two people trying to forge a healthy sexual relationship, at the fringe festival.

The Philadelphia Fringe Festival returns with more than 1,000 works of theater and dance, including some from Lehigh Valley troupes as well as those with area ties.

The 17-day festival, presented by FringeArts Sept. 9-24, is a celebration of innovation and creativity in contemporary performance at venues across Philadelphia.

Allentown Public Theatre is premiering a new devised theater production “**Then Athena**,” which it calls a theatrical fantasia performed by four women voyaging into American myths of gender and valor, Sept. 9-11.

The play is the result of a yearlong collaboration between five different artists. The group got together in fall 2015 to create a piece about women in the military. Samantha Beedle, Holly Cate, Louise Howard and Anna Russell, along with director Troy Dwyer, became frustrated by what was out there about women and valor. Why, they asked, does the story of the woman-hero require her to contrast her experience and identity with those of the man-hero?

As they worked, they began telling stories about things that had happened to them, bold women from history they admired and fictional characters they liked. They started thinking less about “women in the military” and more about how to overcome the “staleness” that often clings to the story of the woman-hero.

The result is “something truly exciting,” Dwyer says.

“Then Athena” is an experimental collection of works created in the spirit of European avant-garde devised theater that joins stories about 14 female characters — some historical, some from pop culture, some original — as they confront the idea of “heroine” in modern American mythologies.

Ranging from playful and funny to dark and raw, each piece tells its own story. But the pieces also fit together to form a theatrical mosaic and portrait of the sometimes-real, sometimes-mythic (but always disputed) American woman-hero.

“Because the performers also are the playwrights, we’re channeling stories tailor-made for our bodies,” says Russell, Allentown Public Theatre artistic director. “This kind of work isn’t done much in the United States. These are the characters we want to embody, because we weren’t seeing their stories told justly anywhere else, if at all.”

Dwyer says the play also ties into the current state of politics.

“On one hand, the U.S. seems progressive when it comes to the intersection of gender and valor,” he says. “Military combat roles for women and transpeople are opening. Come November, a woman might lead the nation. But on the other hand so might Donald Trump. It’s that Trumpish ‘Miss USA’ notion of valor that makes us want to fight. And we fight with art.”

Fighting also is a significant motif in the piece.

“We’re costumed in military-style clothing,” Cate says. “And yes, we carry prop weapons, including assault rifles. But they are all painted bright red. There is a ‘performance art’ feel.”

There also is humor, much of it supplied by stand-up comedian Beedle, who plays a variety of roles.

“It’s easy just to feel rage when you realize how the stories of women heroes are undervalued,” she says. “I think that’s where I come in handy. Artists like Anna just see red. I crack jokes. But trust me they kill.”

The stories portray American women of all ages, and from all backgrounds.

“I’m 64,” Howard says. “And it’s refreshing to be able to write and perform from my life experience, but also to stretch myself. I play an army general in a minefield in Afghanistan, a wannabe Wiccan who communes with ancient goddesses and even a comic book super-villainess battling

Wonder Woman. I also get to sing a little country and western number.”

Other characters include a Revolutionary War hero who’s secretly a heroine, and a Texas housewife on the edge of apocalypse.

Dwyer says the show has its share of unexpected twists and turns.

“I’ve never worked on anything quite so sharp, shocking and personal,” he says. “It’s unapologetically feminist, cutting-edge and funny. And even though it’s imaginary and reaches into history and mythology, it breathes with the real souls of the women who created it. In that way it’s far from pretend. It’s happening right in front of you, a real confrontation of real heroines.”

Dwyer says the theater group will produce the show in Allentown in late October or early November.

- **“Then Athena,”** 8 p.m., Sept. 9; noon and 8 p.m. Sept. 10 and 2 and 6 p.m. Sept. 11, Louis Bluver Theatre at the Drake, 1512 Spruce St., Philadelphia. Tickets: \$20, \$15, students.

Basement Poetry, a performance art group from Bethlehem focusing on slam poetry and movement theater, will perform **“Her: The Female Experience from Birth to Death.”**

This production tells the story of women and those who strongly identify with the female experience. The 90-minute piece uses storytelling through poetry, dance, music and acting to present a multi-dimensional look of what it’s like to live and breathe in the female body.

Basement Poetry was founded January 2015 and is an ensemble of emerging and established artists and poets with the goal of taking their poetry to new heights. They use movement, dance and song to develop devised works based on social and political issues. “Her” is their fifth devised theater production. Their work, including “Her,” has been

produced at The Ice House, Lehigh University, Northampton Community College and Touchstone Theatre. This is their first production being self-produced at FringeArts.

Next season they want to expand into other literary art forms and produce original short stories and scripted plays.

During the FringeArts production, they will hold a sanitary feminine products drive for a local women's shelter in Philadelphia. Those who donate will receive a copy of Basement Poetry's "HER Stories," a collaboration of poems and photos with young women at the Valley Youth House and the performers.

• **"Her: The Female Experience from Birth to Death,"** 3 and 8 p.m. Sept. 10, The White Space at Pig Iron, 1417 N. Second St., Philadelphia. Tickets: \$7-10. basementpoems@gmail.com.

A Muhlenberg graduate makes up one-half of **Goatpig**, which is presenting **"Story of My Eye,"** which Zach Trebino calls "grotesque, human, raw and gleeful."

The work was created by two recent grad school graduates and real-life lovers — Trebino, a 2011 Muhlenberg College grad, and Jenni Messner. The piece, which they call a vaudevillian meta-pageant, is an absurd and episodic adventure about two people figuring out how to forge a healthy sexual relationship in the midst of an influential media landscape.

In "Story of My Eye," the collaborators filter their private lives through public personas, touching on human sexuality, taboos, consumer culture and the pervasive influence of media on private behavior. They enact sexual fantasies with food, stage competitive game shows, share stories and question the very performance as it's being performed. All of this action is set against a multimedia tapestry, an overabundance of televisions that display video symphonies that comment on the actions on stage.

“ ‘Story of My Eye’ is a gleeful riot,” Trebino says. “It makes transgressing feel so good.”

Messner says she has never been more uninhibited as a performer.

“It’s downright joyous to share with an audience like we do in ‘Story of My Eye,’ ” she says.

“Story of My Eye” premiered at Towson University in Baltimore as Trebino’s MFA Final Project. It was developed at the Center for Performance Research in Brooklyn.

Because of the graphic nature of the performance and the venue’s restrictions, only people 21 and older can attend.

The show also will be performed Nov. 9 at Dixon Place in New York City.

• **“Story of My Eye,”** 7:30 p.m. Sept. 7 and 12; 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sept. 10 and 11, Kung Fu Necktie, 1250 N. Front St, Philadelphia, second floor. Tickets: [\\$10.www.fringearts.com](http://$10.www.fringearts.com).

Muhlenberg named top college theater program

The theater program at Muhlenberg College has been named the nation’s best undergraduate college theater program by The Princeton Review. The education services company featured the school in the new 2017 edition of its college guide, “The Best 381 Colleges.”

This year’s ranking is the second time Muhlenberg has topped The Princeton Review’s list. The college previously was named No. 1 in the 2012 edition of the guide.

“The department seeks out students and faculty with a diverse range of backgrounds, talents and perspectives, and we create opportunities for them to collaborate in pursuit of their artistic visions,” says Beth Schachter, department chairwoman of theater and dance and professor of

acting, directing and history and theory of theater. “We embrace our diversity and synergy to create a world-class production program, and our students thrive on that breadth of experience.”

Only about 15 percent of America’s 2,500 four-year colleges are profiled in the book. Published annually since 1992, it includes detailed profiles of the colleges with rating scores for all schools in eight categories.

In addition to its top theater ranking, Muhlenberg has again has earned distinction for campus dining. The college is listed at number 16 for “Best Campus Food.”

“Muhlenberg College’s outstanding academics are the chief reason we chose it for this book and we strongly recommend it to applicants,” writes Robert Franek, Princeton Review’s senior vice president-publisher and author of “The Best 381 Colleges.”

“We make our selections primarily based on data we collect through our annual surveys of administrators at several hundred four-year colleges. Additionally, we give considerable weight to observations from our school visits, opinions of our staff and our 24-member National College Counselor Advisory Board.”

The rankings for Muhlenberg and other colleges listed in this edition are partly based on The Princeton Review’s survey of 143,000 students attending the colleges. The 80-question survey asks students to rate their schools on several topics and report on their experiences. Topics range from their assessments of their professors to opinions about their school’s library, career services and student body’s political leanings.

The Princeton Review is an education services company known for its tutoring, test-prep courses, books and other student resources. It is not affiliated with Princeton University.

Muhlenberg’s 2016-2017 theater season includes Gilbert and Sullivan’s

“Pirates of Penzance” Oct. 28 to Nov. 6; Gertrude Stein’s “Listen To Me,” Feb. 22-26; the drag-culture drama “Wig Out,” March 30 to April 2 and Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard” April 26-29. Info: www.muhlenberg.edu/main/academics/theatre-dance/onstage/mainstage.html kathy.lauer@mcall.com 610-778-2235