
GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. — Sitting on a rehearsal table in Great Barrington is an uncredited character in Dan Lauria’s “Just Another Day”: a large, bronze handbell engraved with Lauria’s name and the play’s title. It clangs from offstage anytime the elderly couple onstage, struggling to retain their memories, touch.

“Everybody thinks that’s the absurdist thing, but that’s actually the most real thing in the play,” Lauria said.

That’s because the bell is meant to simulate the buzzing emergency alarms some memory care facilities use for the safety of patients suffering from dementia, which is an undercurrent in “Just Another Day,” making its world premiere from Aug. 3 to Aug. 13 at Great Barrington Public Theater in partnership with Shadowland Stages, located in New York’s Ulster County. The show’s opening, originally scheduled for July 27, was delayed by one week.

“Just Another Day” follows two anonymous writers, portrayed by Lauria, best known for playing patriarch Jack Arnold on “The Wonder Years,” and Jodi Long, who recently won an Emmy for her role in Netflix’s “Dash & Lily,” trying to remember who they are and what they mean to each other.

A personal friendship inspired Lauria — who views himself as an actor who writes — to pen “Just Another Day.” His friend suffers from dementia, and he ended up at a facility where buzzers provide...
Sonic cues for meals and bedtime and human contact between patients is discouraged. The friend’s memory is fracturing — some days he doesn’t recognize his daughter or longtime friend Lauria — but there was one subject he can still recall with absolute precision: baseball.

“If we start talking about the Yankees, he goes right back to the 1930s when he saw Babe Ruth,” Lauria said. “He can tell you every batting average, everything, and then eventually, he’ll actually know it’s his daughter and sometimes he even knows it’s me.”

Old movies replace baseball in the play, with exchanges about “His Girl Friday,” Cary Grant’s filmography and more sparking memories and connections between the unnamed man and woman. The two trade wits, laughs and frustrations as they struggle to remember — she, a poet, opts for barbs laced with multisyllabic words requiring a dictionary; he, a comic, leans into humor. Anytime the two touch, the ominous bell rings offstage.

This is not the first time Lauria and Long collaborated on a project. The two played husband and wife on the TBS sitcom “Sullivan & Son” from 2012 to 2015, and they participated in a reading of “Just Another Day” in Durango, Colo., last summer. Long joined the reading at Lauria’s request after Wendie Malick had to drop out because of a scheduling conflict. After Durango, Long and Lauria did another reading in New York City before putting it on its feet for its world premiere in Great Barrington.

“People really responded to it,” Long said. “It was pretty wild.”

At its core, the play is about the human condition, Long said. Yes, there is the unspoken undercurrent of dementia, and that journey, particularly for Long’s character, provides a challenging and compelling arc for the actors to play. But watching the two try to connect their lives and relationship touches on something universal. We all age, memories fade, forgetfulness sets in.

“The other day, I was talking and I said, ‘Well, you know, the, you know, the airplane driver. What is that called?’ I couldn’t remember ‘pilot.’ ” Long said. “I was very tired, but it was kind of stunning to me. Those moments are completely human, and those are the things that I think connect us.”

Lauria also sees it as a story about language, which is why he wrote the characters to be writers. The acts mirror each other in structure — in the first act, our comic tries to convince the poet to write, and in the second, she tries to get him to write — and focus on the words.

“Literally, it is about words being lost and us forgetting,” he said. “We’re losing language. We’re afraid of it. We’re afraid of being sentimental, we’re afraid of the words. We’re just afraid of it. And I think the theater has to elevate it.”

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If you go

"Just Another Day" by Dan Lauria
Presented in partnership by Great Barrington Public Theater and Shadowland Stages

When: Aug. 3 to Aug. 13; shows start at 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
Where: McConnell Theater, Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Road, Great Barrington, MA
Tickets: $25-$50
More info: available online, by calling 413-372-1980
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