See live theater again — outdoors — at this festival inspired by campfire storytelling

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Over the past year, the pandemic has forced audiences and theater artists to reinvent, reimagine and, in some cases, settle for a different kind of theater.
Actors have livestreamed performances from their living rooms or holed up in COVID-19-safe booths to record audio plays. Audiences have gotten used to “applauding” virtually in the form of shout-outs in chat boxes or quietly to themselves in the isolation of their own homes.

Some have even tried their hands at doing plays by phone or just between two strangers and some flash cards like in 600 Highwaymen’s “A Thousand Ways” series at On the Boards last fall.

Now, as the weather warms and pandemic restrictions loosen, audiences and theater artists alike are itching for something resembling live, in-person theater again.

With The Campfire Festival, The Williams Project is one of the first local theater groups to answer the call, and it’s answering it by taking theater back to a simpler time — telling stories around the campfire.

While there likely will not be an actual campfire, the festival — scheduled for May 20-June 5 at Rainier Arts Center in Seattle — will be held outdoors and feature five local artists. Justin Huertas, Aaron Martin Davis Norman, Ryan Guzzo Purcell, Maggie L. Rogers and Dedra D. Woods will perform 30-minute solo shows for small, socially distanced audiences. Each artist plans to use the space in different ways.

During Purcell’s “The Wealth Walk,” for example, audience members will be guided on a 2-mile walk that the festival’s web page describes as “part walking meditation, part audio play, part political activism, and part living history.”

Rogers is considering using audiovisual elements to help capture the fiery spirit and “rough and tumble” life of her grandmother, a woman who burned her own garbage and loved the movie “Dirty Dancing.”

For most of the festival artists, it will be the first time in more than a year that they will be in front of a live, in-person audience.

“It almost doesn’t feel real, it’s been so long,” said Rogers.

The significance of this first return to in-person performance has inspired common themes across the very different stories of each artist’s solo show.

“This year has forced everyone to confront time and loneliness,” said Purcell, artistic director of The Williams Project. “None of the pieces specifically deal with the pandemic, which I think is fascinating and I’m sort of grateful for, to be honest. We hear
enough about that. But all of them are dealing with what is this major disruption to our lives. How to make sense of it and how to move forward with this as a new sort of touchstone in our shared history.”

Norman has never really been camping, but for him, the image of the campfire conjures up memories of sitting in the back of his grandpa’s pickup truck in Mississippi, riding up and down hilly roads. It made him think of home and family and the long tradition of Black people sharing stories wherever they found community.

“It’s on a porch, it’s sitting in a car, it’s sitting at the kitchen table, it’s preparing food, it’s sitting in the back of a pickup truck. It’s all the time,” he said.

Through his solo play “Storytime: Good Grief,” Norman plans to tell some of the stories that he and his siblings have shared about their mother as they grieved and remembered her each year since she passed away in 2014. A musical director, Norman says the stories will also be surrounded by music that will bring out other aspects of the stories.

“My intent … was not just to share sad stories, but just offering a space for healing and reflection,” said Norman. “I think there are so many people that are mourning so many different things, be it the loss of a loved one, the loss of what was … The world has changed for everyone. Offering a time for reflection and taking a moment to just grieve together is something that is needed.”

The show, Norman says, will invite audience members to join in the healing, possibly by sharing some of their own stories on paper and offering them at an altar. The details are still in the works but Norman thinks the more stripped-down environment will make for a more intimate experience than it might have been in a traditional theater.

Woods’ solo show will take the audience back to 1967 when her mother witnessed the riots unfolding in Detroit, then look forward to today and how things have or haven’t changed.

The outdoors means many of the usual technical elements that go into theater have been stripped down. The lighting is at the whim of the sun and clouds, the set at the mercy of the wind.

But that’s all part of the plan, according to Purcell, a plan that will help the performers connect with audiences in a more intimate way and make everyone rethink what they know about what makes theater theater.
Huertas, who will be creating a musical short performed by songwriter and actor Rheanna Atendido, likened the festival to MTV Unplugged or VH1 Storytellers.

“You get to see them in this stripped-down version where it’s just you and the artist,” said Purcell. “I specifically thought of artists that I wanted to work with who have big personalities, big instruments, big presence, so that just them and a microphone and a patch of grass and a concrete slab will actually feel like another world. It’s that simple with the right artist to really transport people.”

Although the theater on display at the Campfire Festival will be technically simpler, The Williams Project has aimed to adhere to Gov. Jay Inslee’s Phase 1 reopening guidelines just in case the Seattle area moves back to Phase 1. (Most counties in Washington, including King, are in Phase 3.) That has meant a great deal of reading up on guidelines and “a lot more work with measuring tape than I ever expected,” Purcell joked.

“I do believe there’s something really excellent about plays that aren’t in theaters, just the fact that you’re in a real space that has a different energy,” said Purcell. “There’s something freeing about it.”

The Campfire Festival

Presented by The Williams Project, May 20-June 5, showings at 4:30 p.m. and 7 p.m.; pay-what-you-can, outdoors at Rainier Arts Center, 515 S. Alaska St., Seattle; 206-494-5364, ext. 1, thewilliamsproject.org/campfire-festival. COVID-19 safety requirements: face coverings and social distancing required; groups of no more than 10, from no more than two different households.

Other upcoming outdoor theater:

**Vashon Repertory Theatre Fest**: July 22-Aug. 1; various locations; $15-$20 per show, tickets on sale May 17; 206-769-6029, vashonrepertorytheatre.org.

30+ staged performances outdoors, including Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” Woody Guthrie’s “American Song,” UMO Ensemble’s “Fail Better” and readings of original works.
COVID-19 safety requirements: attendance limited to 100 people per performance, observance of safety protocols required.

**GreenStage’s Shakespeare in the Park:** July 9-Aug. 14; various locations; free; 206-748-1552, greenstage.org/shakespeare-in-the-park-3.

COVID-19 safety requirements: masks and social distancing.

**“Marisol” by José Rivera:** Presented by The Williams Project, dates and location to be announced; pay what you can; 206-494-5364, thewilliamsproject.org/marisol.

COVID-19 safety requirements: masks and social distancing.

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