

Interview with the Soulful Couple Behind the Much Anticipated 2023 Phoenix Theater Festival – Live Arts in Nyack

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Phoenix Theater Festival's founding and creative directors, husband/wife team Craig Smith and Elise Stone

“I’m a crazy idealist, so I think that synchronicity happens in good theater where the performers and the audience are all living and breathing together,” said Elise Stone, Artistic Director of the Phoenix Theatre Ensemble.

One could argue that we’re all idealists when it comes to a good story. What adult can say they never smiled at a happily-ever-after bedtime story, or lost sleep over a creepy campfire story as a kid? Part of the job of Stone, and her spouse, Phoenix Executive Director Craig Smith, is to communicate with that kid inside all of us to create performances that truly resonate with audiences. And judging by the reviews and feedback from last year’s inaugural Phoenix Festival Smith and Stone do their jobs quite well.



The second annual Phoenix Festival in Nyack will take place over four weeks, starting September 28th, with the final performances set for October 21st. The shows include old favorites, as well as original productions developed by Phoenix Theatre Ensemble in NYC, as well as dance and music performances. “Put it on the calendar now, because you’ll blink and miss it,” said Smith. One of the performances of *Pan*, a dance piece presented by Emotions Physical Theatre is already sold out.

“Even when we’re doing something just plain fun, like a comedy, it’s never fluff. We bring all the heft of our love for language, literature, and human beings – and the desire to create connections – that’s why we’re storytellers,” said

Stone. As Artistic Director, she has been working hard to develop many different works for many different audiences. “What can we do to adapt to the times and draw people in for something they can’t get at home?” asked Elise Stone.

One of the new and exciting plays to come out of Phoenix’s *PlayCoop* incubator series addresses this question head-on. The new work – *Scandalton* – is an interactive 90-minute piece structured like a Jane Austen novel and inspired by the hit show *Bridgerton*. The play’s program reads, “No romantic drama is complete without the judgment of genteel society, which is why at *Scandalton*, the audience will supply the rumors... You bring the tea. We spill it.”

Smith notes that the beauty of a show like *Scandalton* is that it appeals to younger people who want to participate in the fun, as well as the older crowd – of which he laughingly counts himself a member – who can just sit back and enjoy it.

The dance piece *Pan*, “set to hip-hop and more,” explores American boyhood and masculinity through the lens of the classic character Peter Pan. Emotions Physical Theatre grapples with the harsh reality that young Black men die before their time in disproportionate numbers “for reasons we all know but refuse to fix,” according to the program. “*Pan* will deliver an experience that highlights the question ‘what are the reasons a Black boy might not want to grow up?’ through a carefully crafted interdisciplinary theatrical experience focused on movement and dance.”

Another exciting performance coming to Phoenix Festival is *Drinks with Dead Poets*, Phoenix Playwright in Residence Glyn Maxwell's adaptation of his acclaimed novel, in which he also stars. The adaptation sets the play right in Nyack, NY, in the very space where the performance will be held: the upstairs bar at the iconic Hudson House restaurant on Main Street. Smith says this piece will have strong appeal for those who don't enjoy a typical theater environment. "You come in and get a drink, and this incredible play will unfold right in front of you," said Smith.

Other plays featured at the Phoenix Festival include their adaptation of the children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows* created to be enjoyed by all ages, the critically acclaimed adaptation by Marilyn Campbell and Curt Columbus of the Dostoyevsky classic, *Crime and Punishment*, the original

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comedy *Reflections from the Shallow End of the Dating Pool*, and much more. Another exciting addition to the Festival this year is their brand new augmented reality walking tour *Digital Dreaming*, which is free to the public, and takes you via smartphone on a guided tour of Nyack's history.

"I have a dream of audience members walking through the village as you do at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland to see an amazing performance in one-of-a-kind, non-traditional venues all over the city," said Smith. It's a dream that's quickly becoming a reality, as the Festival approaches its second year. Stone mentioned a comment made by co-founder and artistic director of the famed *Repertorio Espanol*, Rene Buch, who said, "Theater has become something that's seen as cake for the elite, but it really has always been and should always be bread for everyone."