

THE DURANGO HERALD | Katie Chicklinski-Cahill, Arts & Entertainment Editor | 375-4558 | katie@durangoherald.com |

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Durango PlayFest sets sail for 6th season

Annual festival begins next week in various venues around Durango

BY JUDITH REYNOLDS
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

Debbie Pfeifer said she continually asks: "How do we involve the community?"

As board chairwoman of Durango PlayFest, now in its sixth season as a development project for new American plays, Pfeifer said that she and her colleagues are always encouraging audience engagement.

"The talkbacks are important, and we encourage the moderators to ask specific questions and encourage the audience to do the same," she said. "We want more than thanks and flattery. We want constructive criticism."

While the opening playwright panel is structured for the authors to talk about their plays and process, Pfeifer said, she

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Durango PlayFest, sixth annual festival of new American plays with readings, parties, a playwright panel.

WHEN: June 25-30.

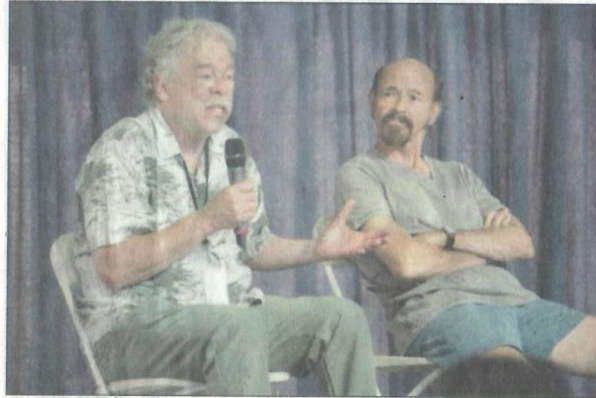
WHERE: Durango Arts Center 802 East Second Ave.; Rochester Hotel, 726 East Second Ave.; Blue Rain Gallery, 934 Main Ave. Unit B.

TICKETS: All-access pass \$150. Single tickets: \$30, \$25, \$15 and \$10. Free 5 p.m. June 26 Playwright Panel.

MORE INFORMATION: Call 335-8264 or visit www.durangoplayfest.org.

hopes people will come with questions.

"We take risks," she said, like last year's one-woman show about mental illness, or a play about dementia, or making a difficult decision about abortion. "A shared experience in a the-



Courtesy of Durango PlayFest

Playwright Richard Dresser and director Joe Cacaci speak with audience members in 2022. Dresser returns for his second PlayFest to workshop "All That Remains."

ater about difficult issues may be one way to bridge polarization."

Four American playwrights have been invited to bring a new play to Durango for a week of intense workshops. By midweek, on a rolling calendar, each will receive a staged reading. And the

audience will be invited to comment and give feedback.

The festival's opening party-fundraiser, with its \$100 ticket for patrons and fans, begins at 6 p.m. June 25 at the Rochester Hotel on Second Avenue. At 5 p.m. June 26, a free playwright

panel session will welcome the public. Like last year, the event will be held in the Blue Rain Art Gallery, 934 Main Ave., which Pfeifer will host.

"The role I play is just that, a role," she said. "I'll introduce each speaker, and I will ask general questions, but the best questions come from the audience."

Playwrights Kathleen Cahill ("Mrs. Einstein"), Richard Dresser ("All That Remains") and Deb Hiett ("Circle Forward") constitute the panel. The fourth playwright, James Anthony Tyler ("Hop Tha A") will be at Durango Arts Center in final preparations for the first evening reading at 7 p.m. Most attendees walk the few blocks to DAC for the opening reading.

As in years past, a bevy of professional directors and actors will activate the daytime work sessions. Some, like actors Ray Abruzzo ("The Sopranos," "Transparent"), Jane

See **PLAYFEST, 2B**

PlayFest

Continued from 1B

Kaczmarek ("Malcolm in the Middle") and Jack Gilpin ("The Gilded Age," "Billions") will be easily recognizable as they are seasoned players in movies and television. The company includes Equity Actors and Directors plus a small number of local thespians. Check www.durangoplayfest.org for all information including ticket prices.

Pfeifer calls herself a theater enthusiast, and has been since she graduated from the University of Nebraska in communications with a minor in English. She and her husband, Tom Stritikus, will be moving to Los Angeles this summer when he begins his tenure as president of Occidental College.

"We attended PlayFest in its first year," Pfeifer said. "We were so delighted to learn about it. It's unique - the intimacy of playwright, actors, directors and audience."

Playwright Richard Dresser

"The most challenging and satisfying storytelling a writer can do is for the theater," Richard Dresser said recently in a phone interview. "TV is the most lucrative. The form is set, and if you get a series, you can hire other writers to create episodes. Movies? Once you sell the rights to a script, it's no longer yours. Each form is different."

Dresser has succeeded in all three formats, writing for television and producing a series, movies and the stage.

To his 17 published and produced plays, he will add "All That Remains" this summer in PlayFest.

"It's about an attempt to escape the madness of the United States right now," he said.

"The outcome of the play is that there's no escape. It's a play for this moment."

That's all Dresser would say about his current work except that he's glad he'll be returning to Durango for his second episode of PlayFest.

"My friend Lee Blessing told me about Durango's developmental festival for new plays," he said. "In 2022, I brought my play 'Our Shrinking, Shrinking World,' and we worked intensely for a week and then had a staged reading. It's all about process, and it's hugely fun - and productive."

Dresser said he likes the PlayFest process and even welcomes workshops open to the public.

"I have no problem with that," he said. "I've invited the press to sit in on rehearsals. At Yale Theatre Center, Lloyd Richards used to invite critics to come and see what the process was all about. I did this, too, in

West Virginia. The critics were surprised to see rehearsals where a director didn't just tell actors what to do. The process itself is interesting."

The heart of PlayFest is process - daytime sessions are dedicated to reading and shaping a new play first with a small circle of creatives: the playwright, a director and actors. Those sessions culminate in a series of staged readings for the public. After performance, talkbacks with the audience are part of the process and invaluable, Dresser said. Audience members are encouraged to ask questions and indicate what worked or wasn't clear or seemed out of the fabric of the play.

"The process is the only way to get a sense of whether a play will work," Dresser said.