

FEATURED

HOW ONE CULTURAL MOMENT INSPIRED A MUSICAL*The story behind One Providence Place: A Mall Musical***BY BRIAN JOYCE ON SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2024**

Great art often imitates life. It forces us to peel back the layers of our society and finally experience the raw emotions left out of the history books. When done well, art holds a mirror to all the beauty and ugliness that naturally escapes our traditional perspectives. It begs us to question realities that we once considered truth – and for a brief moment – consider a new paradigm of the world around us. When that happens, it opens us up to questions we don't like to ponder. Questions like, why is gentrification often considered progress? And why does the act of consumerism force us to segregate ourselves – sometimes, even long before our city does it for us?

It can take an act of sheer will to drive out preconceived notions and find a sense of purity in our existence. Perhaps that's why eight college students built a 750-square-foot, fully-furnished hangout inside the bowels of the Providence Place Mall in 2003 – much to the eventual chagrin of mall security – and then lived there for four years. Maybe they were looking for a way to escape consumerism by hiding within its edifice. Perhaps it was their way of thumbing their nose at what we deem an evolutionary necessity of a burgeoning city. Or maybe it was just a fun way to pass the time. Regardless, that one cultural moment caused people to consider often overlooked social, economic, and racial norms.

The story that once made national headlines is now the inspiration for a brand-new musical. Written, directed, and produced by Ayla **Ahlquist**, **Mariah Min**, and **Tina Wolstencroft**, *One Providence Place: A Mall Musical* borrows inspiration from the story of “The Mall Apartment” to process feelings of loss, art, consumerism, relationships, and grief. The dramedy takes us back to the early 2000s when Providence was at the height of its emergence. The 10 cast members sometimes double and even triple up on roles. The music ranges from 2000's pop to dirty R&B, cheesy country to barroom waltzes, villain songs to heartfelt ballads and more. With song titles like “Fill That Hole” and “The Last Real Dreamers of Providence, RI,” an Irish drinking song set to a waltz beat, you will get lost in the story. Local composer **Avi David** wrote all the songs for the musical. “You'll definitely feel moments of nostalgia. It resonates most with mid-September and going back to school,” said co-writer and producer Mariah Min. “The story reflects on the feelings of dealing with emptiness and grief – and what we do to fill that space within us. It asks: Is it okay for empty things to stay empty?”

The performance will hold 10 shows at the AS220 Blackbox between September 19 through 29, with opportunities to attend matinee shows on the weekends. You can purchase tickets for shows at www.harpiesprov.com. Although funded in part by the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the musical itself is an independent production – and the writers, who call themselves The Harpies, are proud of that. So, attend the show and feel good supporting artists as independent as the mavericks who moved into the mall 20 years ago. •

For more information about the musical, cast, and writers, or to purchase tickets, please visit www.harpiesprov.com/. Also, visit their social media pages for a behind-the-scenes look at the production. You can find them at [fb.com/mallmusical](https://www.facebook.com/mallmusical) and [@ mallmusical](https://www.instagram.com/mallmusical) on Instagram.

Photo: The fabled hangout, Michael Townsend

MORE POSTS BY THE AUTHOR:

[Museum Concerts: A commitment to music education](#)

[Should People Use AI When They Write?: Yes](#)

[Roots Report](#)

[Gourds, Ghosts, and Goodies: Fall Guide](#)

[The Genius of Mash-Up Art: Two Thangs](#)