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**ARTS & CULTURE**

## A dramatic musical comedy about Providence Place Mall opens with first show

*“One Providence Place: A Mall Musical,” co-written by a Brown faculty member, takes a humorous and nuanced look at a Providence urban legend.*



Spanning from 2003 to the group’s eventual eviction from the mall in 2007, the musical explores a broad array of both comedic and dramatic themes. Photo Courtesy of Chris Lapidis



By **Campbell Loi**  
Senior Staff Writer

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A dramatic musical comedy about a hidden apartment in Providence Place Mall immersed audiences in a mid-2000s urban legend during the show’s opening on Thursday.

“One Providence Place: A Mall Musical” opened at AS220’s black box theater for its first show in a two-weekend run. The original show was created by Mariah Min, assistant professor in Brown’s English department, as well as Providence-based creatives Ayla Ahlquist and Tina Wolstencroft.

The show explores grief, family, friendship and — of course — the largest mall in Rhode Island.

The play follows a young artist named Riley who discovers an empty space behind a vending machine in the Providence Place Mall. She decides to convert it into a small apartment with her friends, seeing the effort as both an art installation and a secret safe haven to escape from the troubles of the outside world.

Spanning from 2003 to the friends' eventual eviction from the mall in 2007, the musical explores a broad array of both comedic and dramatic themes as Riley grapples with the recent loss of her mother and an increasingly strained relationship with her sister.

Much of the plot is based on the **true story** of a hidden apartment built in Providence Place in 2003, but Wolstencroft explained to The Herald that only loose inspiration was taken from the actual incident when writing the script, and their resulting musical is not meant to be completely representative of real-life events.

The musical is the first project that the three collaborators — known professionally as “The Harpies” — have produced as a collective, and it is also the first time any of them have created a fully original work of musical theater. According to Min, the collaboration had been years in the making, stemming from a mutual background in local improv comedy.

“Because improv is so ephemeral and so light on its feet, we always wondered what it would be like to collaborate on something more structured, more involved and planned out,” she told The Herald. When Ahlquist brought the story of the makeshift apartment in Providence Place to Min and Wolstencroft about a year ago, they saw the concept as “something that we could really work with” and began drafting a script, Min explained.

Upon finalizing the script in May, The Harpies hired composer Avi David to write the music for the show. They held auditions and began rehearsals soon after.

“Our composer has been creating songs in lock-step with the rehearsals, so sometimes we would have songs being sent to us a couple days before,” Min said.

“It’s definitely been interesting not learning something with sheet music and going off of recordings,” said Christina Smith, who plays Riley in the musical. “Early on, we were just kind of chanting the lyrics because we didn’t know what they would sound like, but it was exciting once a new song was ready and you could finally hear the orchestration.”

Smith added that though the rehearsal process was quite different from her previous experiences in theater, she enjoyed being able to act in a production that is fully original. “Actually having a hand in creating this character ... that’s been the most rewarding part of it,” she said.

This creative liberty is evident in the script’s more magical elements, such as the mall security guards reporting to an anthropomorphic walkie-talkie. Most notably, the mall apartment itself is personified; accompanied by balloons, whimsical lighting and an electronic musical motif, the “mall hole” speaks and sings to Riley throughout the show, providing her both literal and metaphorical refuge as she navigates her emotions.

Min added that the setting of the show also allowed for The Harpies to explore many aspects of American society. From mentions of Ken Jennings and Saddam Hussein to plot points involving Blackberry phones, the musical is replete with references to early-2000s culture.

“It was interesting for us not to just directly reproduce the story and dramatize it, but to kind of think about what the act of creating an apartment inside the mall could say about other aspects of personal and social life,” she said.

“One Providence Place” will have one more weekend of performances before closing on Sept. 29.

“I just really want people to feel something, whether they’re super happy or they relate to the grief aspect,” Wolstencroft added. “There’s just so many different themes.”

“We really genuinely were so bowled over by how great the music was and how impressive the cast was,” Min said. “I can’t wait for the cast to then see how their work is being paid off (and) I hope people really have a good time at the show.”

Min noted that The Harpies plan to continue working together on future projects, and stressed the importance of engaging with the local arts and community theater scenes — especially for Brown students.

“Even with a busy academic or extracurricular schedule, if you have a little time to venture outside of College Hill, see what’s going on in the city,” she said, adding that she strongly encourages students to “take the full advantage if they can of local events, the independent arts (scene) and what Rhode Island has to offer.”



**Campbell Loi**

*Campbell Loi, a senior staff writer and copy editor for The Herald, is a junior from Syracuse, NY studying Public Health and International and Public Affairs. Outside of academics, she loves all things music and enjoys performing, arranging, and constantly listening to songs in her free time.*