

ARTS

'A Mall Musical': Story of Providence Place's secret room turned into new musical

Country, Irish drinking waltz, upbeat dance number, all promise pathos in musical numbers



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Providence Journal

Published 4:56 a.m. ET Sept. 23, 2024 | Updated 4:56 a.m. ET Sept. 23, 2024

PROVIDENCE – The story of the secret room inside the Providence Place mall discovered by security guards in 2007 was making another round through the city, in its mythmaking process, when it was retold to two of the three members of an improv group.

Ayla Ahlquist told Mariah Min and Tina Wolstencroft the story about the apartment built within the mall's parking garage, Min said. It was built in 2003 and not discovered until 2007. (It is also the subject of a documentary.) By the time the story reached Min and Wolstencroft, it was approaching urban legend status.

"We were all taken with the story," Min said. "It seemed to us intriguing to explore, the meaning of encountering an empty space and wanting to fill it, to explore that notion of filling empty spaces in a historical context, the early 2000s, and in personal and artistic points of view."

The three were so taken with the story they decided to turn it into a musical, with the help of a Rhode Island State Council on the Arts grant to pay performers. Within a year, they wrote the musical and commissioned a composer, Avi David, and are now performing their "One Providence Place: A Mall Musical," about the secret apartment.

Performances started on Thursday and run for 10 performances through Sept. 29 at AS220's theater at 95 Empire St.

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The group, The Harpies, wanted to create something that was "incredibly produced and involved," essentially, the opposite of their forte of improv.

"It seemed so involved with so many moving parts, the script, the composer, the cast," Min said. "In improv, there are no sets, or props either. That kind of multidimensional art experience really called to us."

Writing their first musical was a "super steep learning experience," Min said.

"It taught us a lot, like how to put on an independent production, and we feel like we've conquered it, the mountain of the indie musical," she said.

How to write a musical

The musical pulls on a variety of musical genres for its pieces, which were chosen for moments when characters emotions would already be heightened.

"We really wanted to weave together these stories of personal grief and historical change with an art project along side it," Min said.

The security guards are struggling with their role in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in a "lovely, searching inside the self" country-style song, while the apartment dwellers move in on an upbeat dance number and move out on a "wistful Irish drinking waltz."

"We did draw a hefty bit of inspiration from early 2000s music, but it doesn't resemble anything existing," Min said. "The composer is very jazz and funk, R&B and soul inspired, so there are interesting guitars and funky rhythms."

Ahlquist had worked with David before and introduced him to the group. He immediately understood what they were trying to say, blending multiple story lines and exploring the early 2000s, Min said.

Tickets are going fast

Tickets are \$20 and have been selling very fast, Min said.

The group wanted the musical to premiere in September to capture some back-to-school energy and as a nod to the event that shaped that era, the 9/11 attacks.

The musical is running for 10 performances based on the availability of the AS220 theater, which is booked immediately thereafter, but Min said she hopes to bring the show back to the stage again. She said to check the website harpiesprov.com to see if it gets a reprise.

The Secret Apartment isn't the only Providence institution to get its own musical. In 2003, the late Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci Jr. became the subject of "Buddy Cianci: The Musical."

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