

## New play's spotlight will shine on Pussy Riot and protest punk rock



Because nothing says Russian protest punk rock like a Washington wine-and-cheese reception, the folks who run the [Contemporary American Theater Festival](#) held a small party last week to present excerpts from a new play called “We Are Pussy Riot.”

The docudrama, about the celebrity Russian dissidents/punk rockers, will get top billing this summer when CATF presents five new American plays during its annual four-week festival at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va. To get Washington audiences excited about the commission, CATF invited playwright Barbara Hammond to come down from her writing outpost on Cape Cod, Mass., to read excerpts from “We Are Pussy Riot.”

“Whatever you think you know about Pussy Riot . . . there is more,” Hammond told the group. “It’s just this onion that keeps opening up.”

“We Are Pussy Riot” is the result of a \$10,000 commission granted to Hammond by CATF, which then

received a \$15,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant to support the project. Hammond approached writing the play like a documentarian, traveling to Russia to interview members of the group, including several who were not arrested after Pussy Riot's protest against Vladimir Putin at a Russian Orthodox church in 2012. Much of the trial proceedings were broadcast, so Hammond was able to weave the actual dialogue into her script.

"This play is also funny, I hope," Hammond said before reading the verbal sparring of the judge and prosecutor, as if doing a Borscht Belt comedy routine. She apologized in advance for her "terrible Russian accent."

Ed Herendeen, the festival's artistic director, connected with Hammond through her agent, but Hammond was unaware that she was supposed to have a specific pitch prepared. So after she stuttered a bit, she said, "I've been thinking so much about Pussy Riot."

Herendeen was intrigued, having been impressed by Hammond's best-known work, "The Eva Trilogy." So while Shepherdstown might seem an unusual place for the premiere of a federally funded play about a Russian punk band, he gave Hammond the commission and has been proudly touting the play ever since.

At the reception, Herendeen also previewed the other plays on the 2015 CATF schedule: Johnna Adams's "World Builders," Sheila Callaghan's "Everything You Touch," Steven Dietz's "On Clover Road" and Michael Weller's "The Full Catastrophe."

"Come and see the birth of these plays," he said. "Evangelize for us."

'Dear Evan Hansen' cast

Arena Stage has announced the full cast and creative team for its summer tryout of the new musical "Dear Evan Hansen" by the much-buzzed-about songwriting team of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, the duo who adapted "A Christmas Story" for the stage and wrote songs for the television show "Smash." [The theater already announced](#) that Ben Platt, who plays the geeky roommate in the movies "Pitch Perfect" and "Pitch Perfect 2," will star in the musical about social anxieties in high school.

Platt will be joined by five Broadway vets: Rachel Bay Jones ("Pippin"), Laura Dreyfuss ("Once"), Mike Faist ("Newsies"), Michael Park ("Cat on a Hot Tin Roof") and Tony nominee Jennifer Laura Thompson ("Wicked" and "Urinetown"). The young actors Will Roland and Alexis Molnar ("Sharknado 2") will round out the cast.

Additional creative-team members include lighting designer Japhy Weideman, who is up for two Tony Awards this year, and music director Ben Cohn, an assistant conductor from "Wicked." Alex Lacamoire had been announced as music director; he is now listed as music supervisor. David Korins will design the

set and Emily Rebholz the costumes.

*Ritzel is a freelance writer.*