



CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATER FESTIVAL

Where Reality Unravels

‘World Builders’ to peer into the worlds of mental illness, fantasy

Editor's Note: Every Sunday, The Journal will preview one of the five plays featured in the 2015 Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown. The CATF runs from July 10 to Aug. 2, with pay-what-you-can previews set for this week.

BY JAMISON C. WEST
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SHEPHERDSTOWN — Haddaway asked an important question: What is love?

Is it something that can be established within a rigid set of parameters? Is it defined in many ways, many characteristics, many realms? Is it whatever we imagine it to be?

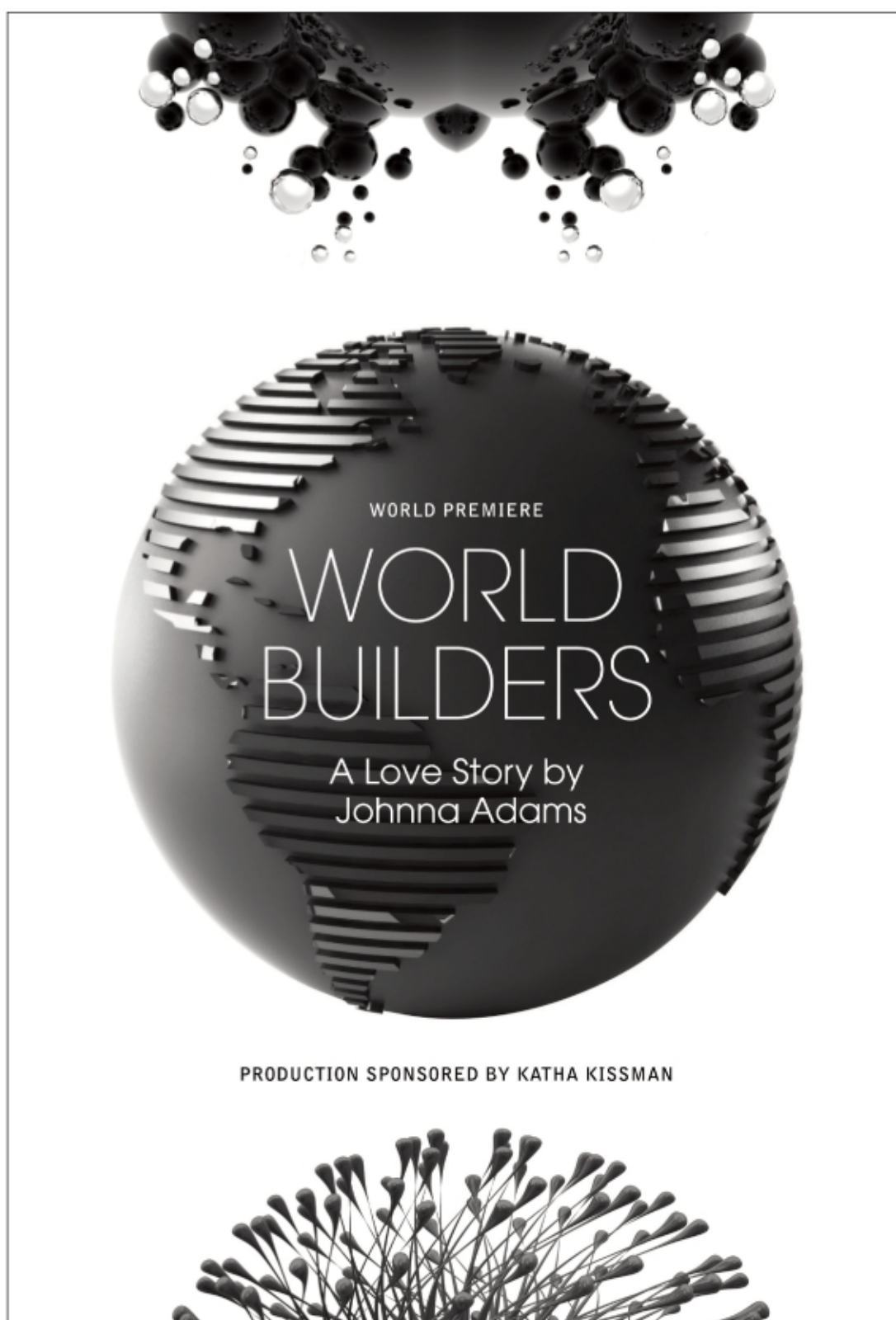
Love and imagination are among the myriad subjects examined in Johnna Adams' "World Builders," one of the five plays featured as part of this year's Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown. The show is 90 minutes in length.

This play is a world premiere, and is Adams' second at the CATF. Her first, "Gideon's Knot," received an incredible amount of success in 2012, according to CATF founder and director Ed Herendeen.

"We had such great success when we did the world premiere of her play Gideon's Knot a couple of years ago, which turned out to be one of the most produced American plays after it left Shepherdstown," Herendeen said.

The audience will enter the worlds of Max and Whitney, two schizophrenia patients committed to the Johns Hopkins psych ward who have entered into a drug trial in order to bring them back to reality. Issues begin to surface, however, because Max and Whitney each enjoy their fantasy worlds — vivid, expansive universes.

"They are in a drug trial testing program and administered a new drug that will help deaden their imaginations and their fantasy life," Herendeen said. "But the twist here is that both Whitney and Max like their fantasies and don't want to give up their fantasy worlds and imaginations. They don't want to give



PRODUCTION SPONSORED BY KATHA KISSMAN

"World Builders" by Johnna Adams will explore the worlds of fantasy and reality. The premiere is set for 6 p.m. Friday, July 10, at Studio 112 in the Center for Contemporary Arts at Shepherd University.

up the imaginary worlds they've created.

"Johnna's writing a very rele-

vant play that raises relevant questions, like what is mental illness? Who are mentally ill? How

do we treat quote-unquote patients who we believe need to be treated?" Herendeen said.

"And the controversy of drugging people who are different from us? Just because somebody's different, does that mean they are ill? Johnna's really raising some unique questions."

Chris Thorn plays Max and Brenna Palughi plays Whitney in "World Builders," which is 90 minutes and directed by Nicole A. Watson. As contemporary theater is wont to do, the play creates important questions — about mental illness as a whole, as well as how society defines as well as treats mental illness.

"It's also going to explore the role of our society in how we administer drugs and it may ask the question, are these people really that different? Is there anything really wrong with these two individuals because they have such active fantasy lives, and have extremely provocative imaginations?" Herendeen said. "Johnna Adams has written a quirky, funny, beautiful, compassionate love story."

Mental illness has been a hot-button topic recently in the news, and discussions are likely to be wide-reaching and captivating. But that's part of the goal with contemporary theater — not just to get people talking, but also searching beyond what they know and see.

"It's an evolving and ongoing conversation long after the work has been seen. And that's what I think good theater does: it inspires audience members to engage and immerse themselves in the spoken word, and the need to discuss it and talk about it long after the experience has taken place," Herendeen said. "So it's a true festival in that we've surrounded it with all sorts of events, both formal and informal, where this living conversation can take place."

"All five of these playwrights are terrific storytellers," he said.

"World Builders" will be the festival's first performance. The premiere is set for 6 p.m. Friday, July 10, at Studio 112 in the Center for Contemporary Arts at Shepherd University.

— Assistant City Editor
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Submitted photo