

Review: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATER FESTIVAL'S Summer 2025 Season Announced

[Andrew White](#)

As we enter into uncertain times, the theatrical experience becomes more vitally important than ever. The ability to tell our stories and share of ourselves, with a community that is eager to reach out, is a superpower we all have—even if we don't realize its power fully just yet. We are, truly, indivisible; and we should take advantage of every chance we have to break bread, share our stories, and broaden our horizons.

This summer, Shepherdstown, West Virginia will host the 35th annual Contemporary American Theater Festival, one of the most eagerly anticipated theatrical events of the year. Each July, this college town hosts many of America's finest stage artists, as they introduce audiences to compelling new works, on themes new and familiar alike. Given that so many CATF productions have gone on to be produced at professional theaters both here and abroad—not to mention adapted for film—this is a rare opportunity indeed. You will be among the first to witness groundbreaking plays, whose

effects will ripple out from Shepherdstown far and wide.

The annual rollouts of new productions are always a treat, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library in downtown Washington hosted one of these year's events. The evening began with a moving rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" by Dr. Sabrina Clark, accompanied by Dr. Daniel Lau; in commemoration of the pivotal recital given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial by [Marion Anderson](#), she revived Anderson's slight shift in the lyrics, to say "Of thee we sing"—a gesture whose meaning resonates with all of us to this day. CATF audiences will remember the 2019 production of Debroah Brevoort's "My Lord, What a Night!" which told the story of Ms. Anderson's night in Princeton, New Jersey, where she was denied a room at the campus hotel but was welcomed to stay with none other than Albert Einstein (a fellow classical music enthusiast).

(This show had its own run at Ford's Theater not too long afterwards—another testament to the influence CATF has on the American theater scene!).

Solemnity aside, each year CATF has many light-hearted moments; one of the things Producing Artistic Director Peggy McKowen stresses is that yes, the theater should be fearless, but fearless stories can be great fun. One illustration was a reading from this year's mainstage production at the Frank Center, [Lisa Sanaye Dring](#)'s "Happy

Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular." Dring's script, developed with the Rogue Artists Ensemble in Los Angeles, features some phenomenal—and phenomenally funny—dialogue, as we follow the story of 2 generations of stunt performers in Hollywood; both gay, but with two very different perspectives on what it means to be gay in an intensely physically demanding profession.

The in-the-round, Marinoff Theater will feature two productions this season, [Mark St. Germain](#)'s "Magdalene," an amusing riff on the contested story of Mary Magdalene, as she matches wits, and spirit, with the Apostle Peter over her reputation, over Jesus' legacy, and most of all the role of women in the early Church (which, as a historian of Christianity, I can attest has been neglected and deserves better treatment). Mr. [St. Germain](#)'s show last year, "The Happiest Man on Earth," was one of the highlights of the Festival, and his ear for dialogue, the ability to find the humanity in serious times, is much appreciated.

In tandem at the Marinoff, with "Magdalene," will be "[Kevin Kling](#): Unraveled." One of Peggy McKowen's goals with CATF is to open up the Festival to other performing arts, and Mr. Kling will give audiences perhaps their first opportunity to experience storytelling as done by a master of the form. Kling is renowned for his craft; self-deprecating and compelling, the journey he has in store for us should be full

of surprises.

The Festival's black box space, Studio 112, has a reputation for some of the most daring and incendiary shows, and this year is certainly no exception. West Virginia's own, playwright Cody LeRoy Wilson, is an Asian American of Vietnamese descent who discovers the challenges of being part of a blended family that includes veterans of the Vietnam War. His autobiographical play, "Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?" will explore the complexities of one of America's most controversial conflicts.

Last, but by no means least; in an era when the medical profession finds itself under fire, [Lisa Loomer](#)'s "Side Effects May Include..." examines a mother's struggles with her son's many diagnoses, and the challenges that inevitably result from his psychiatrist's ever-changing prescriptions, with their ever-changing side effects—you get the picture. Loomer, whose adaptation of [Josefina Lopez](#)'s "Real Women Have Curves" has just opened to rave reviews on Broadway, offers us a reminder that even when we try our best to help our loved ones, that help can create more harm if we're not careful.

July should be a month filled with promise, with new plays, and with fully-engaged audiences. The CATF has been one of West Virginia's perennial treasures, and is well deserving

of our support. Be sure to plan your Summer around everything CATF has to offer.

Images: Posters for Lisa Danaye Dring's "Happy Fall" and [Lisa Loomer](#)'s "Side Effects May Include..." courtesy of CATF.

Photo of producing Artistic Director Peggy McKowen by Seth Freeman.

The 2025 Contemporary American Theater Festival will run from July 11 through August 3, on the campus of Shepherd University in nearby Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

For tickets call 800-999-CATF (2283), or 681-240-CATF (2283) or visit: www.catf.org.

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