

Theatre News: 'Stories with Purpose,' Contemporary American Theatre Festival (CATF) DC Sneak Peek

April 07, 2025



Performers Aubrey Decker, Susan Lynsky, Frank Britton, and Cloie Wyatt Taylor at the Contemporary American Theater Festival sneak peek preview in Washington DC. Photo by Seth Freeman.

Well-established as one of the world's top theater festivals, the Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF) held a

sneak preview on April 1 in Washington, D.C. of "Stories with Purpose," this summer's lineup of new works. The festival will take place at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia from July 11-August 3, 2025, and feature 40 special events including lectures, backstage tours, and post-show discussions.

Hosted by Artistic Director Peggy McKowen, the evening began with an inspiring rendition of "My Lord, What a Morning," performed by soprano and CATF trustee Dr. Sabrina Clarke, and pianist Daniel Lau, followed by brief but enticing introductions of the upcoming season to a packed audience of theater enthusiasts and long-time CATF supporters. The following five new plays will have their world premieres at the festival:

Written by Emmy-nominated playwright, Lisa Sanaye Dring, "Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular" tells the story of two, queer Hollywood stuntmen discovering the value of authenticity while navigating the industry's culture of toxic masculinity. Based on true stories and testimonies, this production features spectacular stunts, puppetry, and multimedia effects.

"Side Effects May Include..." is a new play by Pulitzer Prize-nominee. Lisa Loomer, that takes the audience into the world of psychiatry as a mother accompanies her son on a journey to healing, questioning the side effects of some drugs and

our trust in the medical system.

Kevin Kling is a weaver of stories. With abundant humor and offbeat insights, with an ode to love and a nod to the gods, Kevin Kling in "Kevin Kling Unraveled" shares the threads that have led him to an unexpected destination. There's the trip you plan...and the trip you take.

In "Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?" playwright Cody LeRoy Wilson shares the unlikely journey of his blended family from Vietnam to Plum Run, West Virginia. In this compelling tale, he examines what it means to be Asian American, to love one family while embracing the unknown, and ultimately to question his own identity.

In "Magdalene" by Mark St. Germain, Peter reconnects with Mary Magdalene 18 years after Jesus' crucifixion, seeking her advice and counsel, but they both recall very different versions of Jesus life and ministry. Whose memories are closest to the truth? Whose secrets are revealed? Whose stories will stand the test of time?

Founded in 1991, the annual festival has produced more than 153 new plays, 67 world premieres, and 11 commissions, with many CATF productions having gone on to regional, Broadway, and off-Broadway theaters, as well as film adaptations. The festival schedule allows for audiences to experience all of the productions in two days.

“Stories with Purpose” DC Sneak Preview of CATF’s summer line-up was presented on April 1, 2025, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Library, 901 G Street NW, Washington, DC 20001. For more information about CATF and to purchase tickets, see the full press release below.



Contemporary American Theater Festival Announces 2025 Season

Shepherdstown, W. Va. — The **Contemporary American Theater Festival** (CATF) announces its **2025 season**, featuring **five world premiere plays** by trailblazing playwrights. CATF is also hosting more than 40 special events led by artists and industry experts, including lectures and post-show conversations that delve into the topics explored in the plays. CATF will run from **July 11 through August 3** in three venues on the Shepherd University campus: Frank Center, Marinoff Theater, and Studio 112.

“The plays on CATF’s 2025 season question who we are as people, and how we fit into our communities,” stated CATF

Artistic Director Peggy McKowen. "The journey to find belonging is about understanding the things that make us unique, but also the things that make us similar. There is an element of faith in all these plays — not necessarily religious, but a sense of faith that we place in people and situations that help us grow."

In ***Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?***, West Virginia-born playwright **Cody LeRoy Wilson** tells the unlikely journey of his blended family from Vietnam to Plum Run, W. Va. As the main character, Cody is loving and compassionate when he speaks about his predominantly white family and community, while he also searches for his Vietnamese community. This powerful story proves that who you are is a choice of your own making. Presented this summer in its world premiere, the play had a development production in 2023 at the NuWorks Festival at Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York City, where Wilson is currently based. McKowen said, "It's a privilege to be a national theater but to also be able to present work about and for the West Virginia community, by artists from our community."

Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular by **Lisa Sanaye Dring** follows two queer stuntmen in Hollywood, bringing the intoxication of film trickery and its toll on the body and psyche to life through puppetry, video, cinematic illusions,

and live stunts. Based on true stories and direct testimonies, *Happy Fall* is a tribute to the resilience of the LGBTQIA+ community. "I fell deeply in love with the story of these two men, finding myself moved by their efforts to make their relationship work and saddened by the challenges they faced," shared McKowen. "It's an epic, spectacular production, which will be a fun and unique experience for our audience." *Happy Fall* is produced in partnership with **Los Angeles LGBT Center** and **Rogue Artists Ensemble**.

Playwright, storyteller, and frequent NPR commentator **Kevin Kling** tells his own story of finding his way as a disabled artist in ***Kevin Kling: Unraveled***. Kling's work is infused with an innate sense of humor and reflects the life challenges he has surmounted, including a congenital birth disorder and partial paralysis from a near-fatal motorcycle accident. McKowen found herself moved by Kling's generosity in sharing his experiences, and how at peace and joyous he is. This world premiere is produced in partnership with **Merrimack Repertory Theatre** in Massachusetts.

Magdalene is CATF's fourth fully staged production by **Mark St. Germain**, following *The Happiest Man on Earth* (2024), *Scott and Hem in the Garden of Allah* (2013), and *Forgiving Typhoid Mary* (1994). St. Germain first

shared *Magdalene* with McKowen at the 2024 festival, and now CATF presents its world premiere. The play is set 18 years after the crucifixion, when Peter reconnects with the banished Mary Magdalene. As they recall different versions of Jesus, His miracles, and His vision for the faith, questions emerge. *Magdalene* breathes life into characters from the Western Christian faith, helping us understand them as human beings.

***Side Effects May Include...* by Lisa Loomer** leads us on a nightmarish, Kafkaesque trip into the world of psychiatry as a mother tries to help her son on his journey to wellness. The play explores the side effects of some commonly prescribed pills and questions our trust in the medical system. Loomer's relationship with CATF started in 1991, when her play *Accelerando* was programmed as part of the Festival's very first season. CATF is excited to premiere Lisa's new play this summer, following the opening of her stage musical, *Real Women Have Curves*, on Broadway in April 2025.

In addition to the five mainstage productions, the 2025 festival includes numerous education and community engagement activities as part of CATF's **talktheater** series, which provides opportunities to discuss issues raised in the plays. The vibrant pairing of contemporary works and invigorating discourse fosters a unique and unforgettable

experience. This season's talktheater offerings include:

- **Backstage Tours:** take a peek behind the curtain and learn what goes into the mounting of a production at CATF.
- **Breakfast with Peggy:** get to know CATF's Artistic Director, Peggy McKowen. Peggy shares her extensive experience producing new plays, her rich history with CATF, and her plans for CATF's future.
- **Brunch & Art:** meet and chat with members of CATF's Acting Company. The actors will share their professional journey and their insights on this year's productions.
- **In Context & Lectures:** deep dives where resident artists share their creative process, and industry experts explore the constructs and context of the plays.
- **Post-Show Discussions:** add another layer to your new play experience and join other passionate theatergoers and CATF creatives to respond to, discuss, and unpack the plays.
- **Public Changeovers:** get a step-by-step walkthrough of how the scenic elements transform from one show to another.

TICKET INFORMATION

Individual tickets to the CATF 2025 season range from \$40-\$70. Packages of three or five mainstage performances range from \$174-\$300. Tickets can be purchased online

at catf.org or by calling the box office at 681-240-2283 starting on March 28.

ABOUT THE PLAYS

Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?

By Cody LeRoy Wilson

World Premiere

Cody tells the unlikely journey of his blended family from Vietnam to Plum Run, West Virginia. In this compelling tale, he examines what it means to be Asian American, to love one family while embracing the unknown, and ultimately to question his own identity. This powerful story proves that who you are is a choice of your own making.

Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular

By Lisa Sanaye Dring

World Premiere, in Partnership with Rogue Artists

Ensemble and the Los Angeles LGBT Center

Two queer Hollywood stuntmen navigate the dangers of exposing their love. Based on true life events and told through live stunts, video, puppetry, and cinematic illusions, this story is a fun, raucous tribute to the resiliency of the LGBTQIA+ community. Illuminating issues of identity in the film industry, this play highlights the importance — and danger — of being true to one's self.

Kevin Kling: Unraveled

By Kevin Kling

World Premiere, in Partnership with Merrimack Repertory Theatre

Kevin Kling is a weaver of stories. He is constantly looking for patterns, connections, and unexpected intersections that connect us to one another and to the world. With abundant humor and offbeat insights, with an ode to love and a nod to the gods, Kling unravels the threads that have led him to an unexpected destination. There's the trip you plan... and the trip you take.

Magdalene

By Mark St. Germain

World Premiere

Eighteen years after the crucifixion, Peter reconnects with the banished Mary Magdalene. After casting her out, he now seeks her advice and counsel. Questions erupt as they recall different versions of Jesus, His miracles, and His vision for the faith. Whose memories are closest to the truth? Whose secrets are revealed? Whose stories will stand the test of time?

Side Effects May Include...

By Lisa Loomer

World Premiere What happens when the trust we place in our medical system actually makes us sicker? After a series of diagnoses, a mother leads us through her son's search for wellness, a Kafkaesque journey through the world of

psychiatry. Written with humor and fury, the story explores the side effects of fighting through illness with the ones we love. In these crazy times, it asks us to question... are we medicating life itself?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & FUNDING CREDITS

CATF is grateful to these generous donors and sponsors, whose support is making the 2025 season possible: David and Suzanne Alexander for *Did My Grandfather Kill My Grandfather?*; Mina Goodrich and Lawrence Dean, Hank Willard and Jeffrey Greer, and Alan B. Gibson for *Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular*; Marellen J. Aherne for *Kevin Kling: Unraveled*; Beth K. Batdorf and John S. Bresland, In Memory of Pete Hoffman for *Magdalene*; and C.M. and Stephanie Partridge for *Side Effects May Include*.

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATER FESTIVAL

Named as one of the top theater festivals in the world by publications such as *The New York Times*, *American Theater*, and *World Guide*, the Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF) shapes the future of American theater. Each summer, the Festival produces bold, new plays, allowing audiences to experience all of the productions in the season in as little as two days. The plays produced at CATF spotlight daring and diverse stories, in a truly fearless fashion.