



Apricot Sky creates a Montclair theater troupe



Stage Manager Alyssa Hines, producer Eric Alter, Will Palazzolo and Donna Fraissinet prepare to rehearse "The Upside Down Grief Cake."
ADAM ANIK/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Apricot Sky

A collection of short plays and monologues

All by N.J. playwrights: Eric Alter, Lisa Annitti, Lyle Landon, Elaine Molinaro, Gwen Orel, Brian Parks, Stefanie Sears

Nov. 8-10 and Nov. 15-16

The Grove Street Theatre, 130 Grove St.

Tickets can be reserved at 973-509-2350.

For more information, visit apricotskyproductions.com.

By KELLY NICHOLAIDES

For Montclair Local

Neighbors bond over grief and cake. A married couple tries to schedule time for intimacy. Skinny jeans battle sweatpants. A teenager's driving lesson brings up horrific memories. A clown visits a hospitalized woman. These stories and others reveal poignant layers of relationships — and the characters and conflicts are condensed into 15-minute storylines.

One-act plays are Livingston resident Eric Alter's specialty. He's the founder of Apricot Sky Productions, which showcases local playwrights, directors, actors, and production assistants at the Grove Street Theatre in Montclair. Alter runs the Deron School, a private school for students with special needs, which houses the theater.

"Live theater, especially one-act plays, are kind of a dying craft. I look for original work to give writers the opportunity to share it," Alter said. "I developed a small following of people



ERIC ALTER

who look forward to seeing local writers' work and everyone involved in producing a play to keep theater alive in New Jersey."

Alter's background in social work exposed him to people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, races, ages, and religions going through difficult situations — and helped him hone his craft. "It helps me to write more honest stories. It gives me a greater understanding of the human condition. I write mostly about the complexities of human relationships and what makes us tick. Put that on a stage and people relate," he said.

Apricot Sky's "A Collection of Seven One-act Plays and Two Monologues" takes place Nov. 8-10 and Nov. 15-16 at the Grove Street Theatre.

The plays include "Pants Story," "Sergeant Don't Say Your Name," "Upside Down Grief Cake," "A Visit From a Clown," "The God of Porcelain," "The Quarter," and "P.L." The two monologues are "10:10 p.m." and "Sandwich." [Note: Culture Editor Gwen Orel wrote "P.L.," and is directing Elaine Molinaro's "Pants Story."]

All of the playwrights and directors in the Apricot Sky production are from New Jersey. Many of the company also perform in local community theaters such as Studio Players and Nutley Little Theatre. Overall, 29 people are involved in the show — a lot more than would be possible if Alter were producing just one play.

The appeal of one-act plays is short, fulfilling stories. If audiences don't like one, there are eight more coming in quick succession, Alter continued. "You establish a world in 15 minutes, with a beginning, middle and end, so you need to get to the meat of the meal quickly. For a one-act play, you're judicious in the setup," Alter said. "It moves fast but you still get a satisfying emotional journey in one act. Take an idea and flesh it out, then add the conflict, comedy and drama. The ending has to be realistic, whether it's happy, sad or ambiguous."



At a Sunday tech rehearsal, actors rehearsed lines, stagehands set up, light and sound techs perfected timing for scenes, and playwrights talked with directors. Theater veteran Bob Lowy, 72, of Parsippany, is directing two of the plays at Apricot Sky. "I like to bring a comedic slice of life to the stage. My creative style is external observation. Life presents me with scenes, and I like watching, so I use a voyeuristic approach [to directing]," Lowy said. "I concentrate on the movement of the scene and I love to watch people interact."

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Director Elaine Molinaro, artistic director of Culture Connection Theater, wrote her first play "Pants Story" about a pair of sweatpants and skinny jeans arguing while a woman tries to find a date night outfit. Molinaro created it in a playwriting workshop for the theater run by Gwen Orel, following a prompt to have inanimate objects talk. "As a director, I interpret other people's words and bring the script to life, using the playwright's vision; as a playwright I create the characters and story," Molinaro said. "'Pants Story' came out truthful, humorous, and touching. The pants talk about the young woman's relationship with her body and issues like body image."

Actors Richard Douglass of Montclair and Aaron Gutterman, 16, of West Caldwell, star in "P.L.," Orel's story about a teenager triggered by a memory that affects his driving. "I'm learning how to drive now so I picked up different ways to bring that experience to the stage," Gutterman said.

An English/social studies teacher, Douglass took a hiatus from theater after college.

"It's fun to pretend to be someone else and see what works. Short plays are perfect for me to get back into the theater community. The arts are part of why so many people love Montclair," Douglass said.