

[Lysistrata Brings Bawdy Humor to the Stage at Providence College](#)

□□ Long sick of the Peloponnesian war, Lysistrata convenes a meeting with the women from neighboring Greek city states with the aim of putting an end to it with a novel scheme: withholding sex. It takes a little doing, but the women soon come around to Lysistrata's argument and join forces. The menfolk are incensed, but there is little they can do about it and before long turn to groveling and begging.

All this would be an impressive statement of how women wield enormous power in the affairs of men, unfortunately it's not entertaining to watch a play for the sole purpose of a statement. Aristophanes understood this well, which is why he loaded it with dick jokes and innuendo. Consider this exchange: CLEONICE: And why do you summon us, dear Lysistrata? What is it all about? LYSISTRATA: About a big thing. CLEONICE: And is it thick too?

Saucy humor and exchanges such as this underscore gender roles and expectations. However, Mary G. Farrell's direction never commits itself to the bawdy fun of the material.

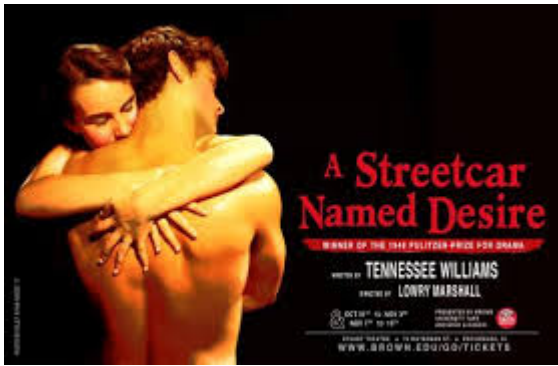
Many of the innuendo-laden lines are flatly delivered or underplayed in a sea of competing voices. At one point, Lysistrata engages in a playful rhyme banter with Cleonice that peaks with Lysistrata shouting "Shucking!" What should have been a moment that elicited an audience giggle, instead falls flat.

In another scene, Cleonice retorts to a Magistrate that she'd rather go "sit on an icicle" than hook up with him. The sting of the insult is taken away by an orchestra rim shot and a chorus of harrumphs from the soldiers.

However, while the direction may be lacking here, the cast is game for the on-stage antics. If you're in for a night of college revue-style humor, this may do it for you, but if you're looking for something more, this may not be for you.

Lysistrata runs through April 13 at Angell Blackfriars Theatre. Visit providence.edu/theatre/Pages/whats-playing.aspx for tickets and information.

[Don't Let This Streetcar Pass You By](#)



Sorry to break it to you, but Stanley Kowalski isn't the main character in *Streetcar Named Desire*. This came as a surprise to me, too; montage tribute clips of the 1951 film have always shown that Brando's Kowalski is the central focus.

And to an extent he is, but Blanche Dubois (Anna Reed), Stanley's sister-in-law, is the star here. Though an aging Southern belle, she looks young enough to pull in a man 10 years her junior, and she often does. This habit, coupled with constant boozing, make Stanley (Arjun Pande) suspicious of her motives even before she arrives to stay at the Kowalski's New Orleans apartment.

Her presence upsets the relationship between Stanley and his wife Stella (Sarah Gage). Together they share a weird understanding of Stanley's physically abusive nature, something he tries to make up to Stella with raw, passionate love making.

As the situation between the three evolves, Blanche takes up with one of Stanley's bowling buddies, Mitch (Skylar Fox), a kind-hearted soul with genuine affection for Blanche. But Stanley's distaste for Blanche's hypocritical personality reaches a breaking point and a choice must be made.

Playwright Tennessee Williams' work usually deals in the motifs of emotionally damaged, working class Southerners forced to deal with their baggage under duress. It colors his plays with a heavy, brooding atmosphere, deep with pathos and only relieved by black humor. Unfortunately, Brown University's production only flirts with this moodiness.

There are a couple of production design missteps here. The Kowalskis are a down-in-the-dirt, working class couple with unstable emotional lives, but the set colors and lighting reflect a stable, inviting household. Missing here is an atmosphere of sweat, grease and smoke. We feel too much at home in a place we should be on edge to leave, but can't tear ourselves away long enough to do so.

However, this setback shouldn't ward anyone off from going; there is still much to be enjoyed in the cast performances. Despite being much younger than the part realistically calls for, Anna Reed shows a deep understanding of Blanche's temperament and reasoning. After a mild first act, Arjun Pande, whose looks alone recall Marlon Brando in his 1950s prime, taps into some of the Stanley's raw violence and puts scare into his co-stars and audience. Sarah Gage's Stella keeps an even keel as the quiet, suffering middle who bounces between trying to calm Stanley and assure Blanche. Finally, Skylar Fox adds a subtle comic touch as the everyman, Mitch.

Water by the Spoonful at Leeds Theatre



There are two plots running parallel here. The first involves a Latino Afghanistan war vet, Elliot (Zach Rufa) and his older cousin Yaz (Ivy Alphonse-Leja). Why we're supposed to be interested in them is not clear; plot-wise the only relevant reason is that Elliot wants to bury his aunt and doesn't have enough money to do so because his birth mother Odessa (Shadura Lee) won't put up the share she owes him. Otherwise, their presence is largely to provide a forum for playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes' questions about why economics and families determine one's place in society (Elliot) and growing out of a collegiate lifestyle (Yaz).

The second plot, and the one that's far more interesting, involves a group of online message board users on the mend from crack addiction. Their usernames are apt; Fountainhead (Andrew Ganem), an Ayn Rand-loving businessman acutely aware of how easy his next fix will land him in the gutter; Orangutan (Natalie Cutler), a Japanese-American 20-something biding her time in the cities of Japan, and finally Chutes and Ladders, a 50-year-old black IRS filing clerk, who, being born wayward ("I was the kid who ate the crayons") now sticks to the straight and narrow with a rigor mortis-like grip.

It's here that director Patricia Ybarra's staging and Hudes' dialogue come together to create an engaging setting where we witness a message board thread happening in real time. In particular, the setup reinforces the reactionary relationship between Chutes and Ladders and Orangutan; she needs someone to lead her on the way, he needs someone to show him how to be brave.

Justin Harris' portrayal of Chutes and Ladders is commanding. Despite being a gregarious character, Harris never plays Chutes and Ladders for laughs, which make his wittier lines, "You should know I'm 50 years old on a *good* day," all the more biting and comical.

While on message about the dangers of stereotyping crack cocaine addiction, *Water by the Spoonful* overplays its hand by trying to address a series of smaller issues at the same level of its core concern: addiction and relationships.

By the end of the third act, the two plots dovetail into each other in a way that creates a resonance around the characters. However, considering a two-hour running time, it's a long way for the audience to go for such a small payoff.

Gospel of Lovingkindness Transforms Audiences



Standing mid-aisle, Bruh Preach (Curtis McLaren) breaks the fourth wall and gazes on us. He raises his arms above his head and speaks: *“For our present troubles are quite small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever!”* He lowers his arms to his sides. At that moment, I realize he has given us a benediction. The audience has been transformed; no longer theatergoers, we are churchgoers. So ends the play.

When we first meet him, Preach is fleeing a mugger. He escapes, staggers into his Southside Chicago church – the same one he has pastored since 1963 (it is now 1996) – and collapses, wheezing to the ground. This is where his wife, First Lady (Lizan Mitchell) finds him. This is it for her; a sign they must move on. After tending to his injuries, she lectures, “You drove me to this choice ... we on a sinkin’ ship and neither of us knows how to swim.” She’s sick of the neighborhood violence, the declining congregation, and the fact they aren’t young enough anymore to deal with any of it.

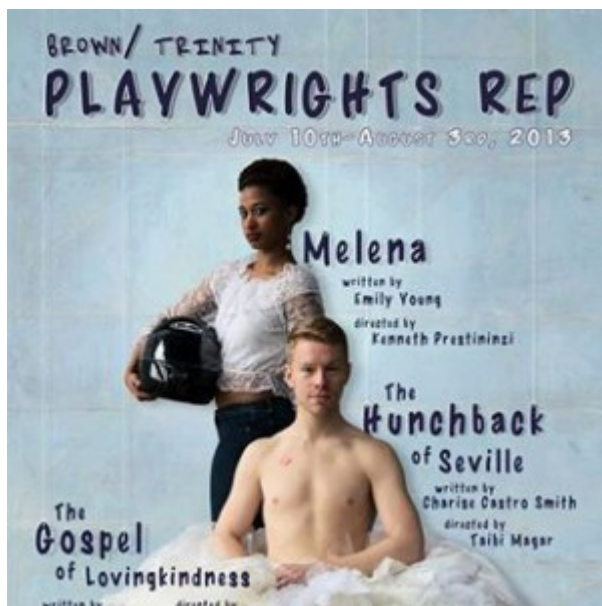
But Preach is stubborn; he must see the church through. Much the same is his attitude toward his gay son Israel (Jonathan Dent). Being from a generation where ‘gay’ meant happy and nothing else, Preach believes Israel to be living with a grave sin. He’s grappling for his son. The son grapples back. They want to reconnect and yet there is a chasm between them that religion won’t let either of them cross.

Much of the play deals with this relationship between father and son, but a good portion is also given to how this affects the mother and her son’s lover, Blood (“not Mr. Blood, just ‘Blood’”), a devilish hood whose watchwords are “I can fix anything.” This is played fiendishly well by Jude Sandy who stills his movements, throwing intensity from his eyes.

In the liner notes, playwright Marcus Gardley likens *Gospel* to a loose retelling of Jesus’ story combined with events from his own personal life. This may be a stretch when one considers the appearance of a mentor/lover, a drag queen named Bubbles (John the Baptist?), but I believe this is in part what Gardley means by loose. By and large, Gardley manages to make a statement about homosexuality and the church (particularly the black church in America) while asking us questions about our own journey for

freedom and what it means.

Seville Asks the Tough Questions



Charise Castro Smith's *Seville* is an old-fashioned farce with a serious underbelly. It gets in its share of chuckles and guffaws from the audience, but the real thrust comes through later, during the quiet unassuming moments.

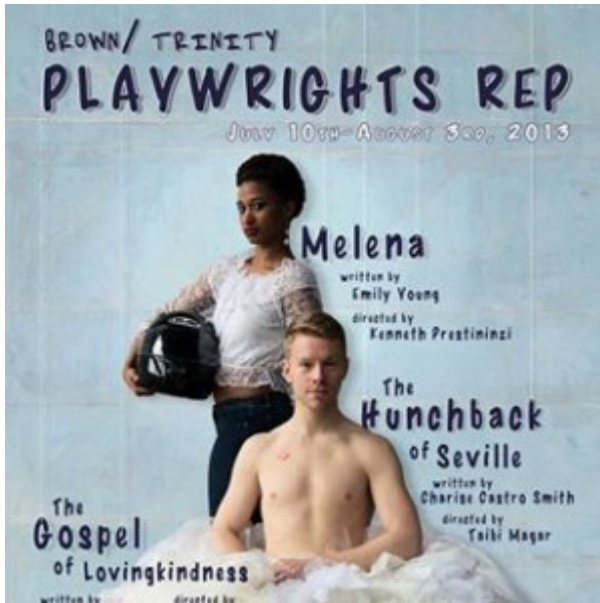
With the framework of Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* to hang her characters on, Castro Smith introduces us to Maxima Segunda Terrible, a quirky Eleanor Roosevelt-like hunchback with an affinity for books and a streak of atheism.

That she's an atheist during the Spanish Inquisition would give the church reason enough to keep her locked away in the tower, but Maxima isn't imprisoned there. Rather, she is free to roam the castle, but prefers to stay inside lest someone from the Royal Court bother her for an opinion on the pressing issue of who should advise the princess.

Maxima would rather have them consider the question of why, if they are Godly people, do they let the Amerindians be slaughtered mercilessly, just because they're different. Many campy but fun answers ensue from this. At one point, Queen Isabella hovers above her throne like a puppet and bellows in the voice of God!

Though it has its share of well-earned laughs, more than a few felt dangerously close to pandering where there was nothing more to the characters' exchange than a well-timed swear word. Ditto for the constant use of modern catch phrases to elicit a laugh. Despite this, *Seville* remains engaging for the questions it poses about why humanity's first response to people who aren't like us is to kill them.

[Taking a Leap with Melena](#)



Somewhere in the first act, Russian émigré Melena (Sarah Tolan Mee) shoots out the window of her Lower East Side apartment and, with manic glee, races down the fire escape. A few partygoers look on after her from the window. Her husband, at wit's end, shouts, "There's nothing for you out there, Melena!"

Somewhere in her feverish mind, she's asking, "Why am I running?" To this, she won't have an answer for another two acts. Three days earlier she married Jack, (Drew Ledbetter), a patient and sometimes stern Nebraskan, in a ceremony she has no memory of. Ever since they've been living the life of a tenement couple; at night Jack card sharks for money while Melena paints and leaps about in an imaginative blur during the day.

Perhaps sensing Melena would prove to be an unstable adult, her father (Mark Cohen) hired Jack to look after her when she arrived in the United States at 16. We don't see what became of her father, whose quintessential Russian grief we only see played out in flashbacks from a yellowing Moscow hotel room.

Jack deals with Melena as best he can in the onset of her delirious state. Flitting back and forth in a tatty nightgown, she often coos and derides him in the same sentence: "Jackie kiss me and I'll leave you alone ... I'm so disappointed, I had hopes for you!" She doesn't know what's going on inside of her, but she needs an outlet for it. Fast.

Enter her Russian cousins, a mischievous vagabond named Labo (Leicester Landon), and his grinning, one-armed accomplice, Jesse (Andrew Polec). Together they drink vodka, sing Russian rock songs loudly, and generally make Jack annoyed enough to bring home his own cousin, a buxom blonde in red named Sheila (Alexandra Lawrence). The five of them sit together, unhappily and happily.

Sheila has the best lines in the show. She's intellectually stupid with a high emotional IQ. In conversation with Jack, she bemoans that her boyfriend makes the same meal night after night: pasta. She wonders aloud, "It begs the question - is this it?" Jack interprets this to mean, "Is this what it means to be in a relationship?" and mistakenly feels a connection with her on this level. But then she continues, "... I mean, I know it's not his fault that he can't provide all the protein we need," which shows that she's squarely talking about the meal itself rather than the relationship.

Emily Young's play is unconventionally structured to give free rein to Melena's delirious daydreams, which range from being a secret agent to the occasional visit from her father or an old baseball player boyfriend (also played by Andrew Poloc). This keeps things fresh by keeping us guessing what comes next, but rarely does it offer much illumination about Melena's character or condition. Maybe what Young wants us to see here is the process by which Melena comes to these decisions about herself, instead of focusing on the end result. In other words, we're there just to watch her leap from rung to rung, trying to find her escape.

[Top Theater in Providence at Brown](#)

Brown/ Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre has a gripping line-up this summer with three new plays



from Brown/Trinity MFA

graduates. Each play will run in repertory for a week at Brown University's Leeds Theatre on Waterman Street. Starting July 31, Festival Week, all three plays will be in repertory and on August 3, the Marathon Madness program will have all plays performed in repertory in a single day.

Melena - A deep-seated passion may be the reason why Melena has thrown herself into confusion just before her own wedding. As tensions mount, her fiancé Jack nears the edge of his patience with her. Will they be able to resolve their issues in time for the wedding or will shared love and frustrations explode their new life as a married couple? This show is written by Emily Young and directed by

Kenneth Prestinzi, the Artistic Director of the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep.

The Hunchback of Seville - Set against the backdrop of Queen Isabella's Spain, where a lame-duck ruler must find a way to stop atrocities from piling up out in the New World. This show is written by Miami native Charise Castro Smith and directed by Taibi Magar.

The Gospel of Loving Kindness - Southside of Chicago. 1996 - Reverend Seer, a longtime pastor in a violence-prone neighborhood, must come to terms with a declining congregation, a wife who threatens to leave and a gunman looking to take away his son. This show is written by Marcus Gardley and directed by Kym Moore.

[The King and I: Charming Springtime Theater from the Ocean State Theatre Company](#)



It is anyone's guess how much of *The King and I* is based on a truthful or, at least, objective account. Anna Leonowens, the real life English governess, was accused of embellishing and sensationalizing her story when she first published it in 1869. Rodgers and Hammerstein, finding Margaret Landon's 1944 book on the subject was little more than a series of vignettes, pulled their narrative straight from the 1946 Daryl F. Zanuck movie starring Rex Harrison and Irene Dunne. However, none of this should disturb audiences for the Ocean State Theatre's production. It is fantastic springtime theater. Alison Mahoney and Christopher Swan bring a breezy touch to their roles as the title characters - one outside her culture, the other questioning his. They are helped in no small part by a disciplined supporting cast (with lots of children!), bright Victorian-style sets, and a jaunty musical score.

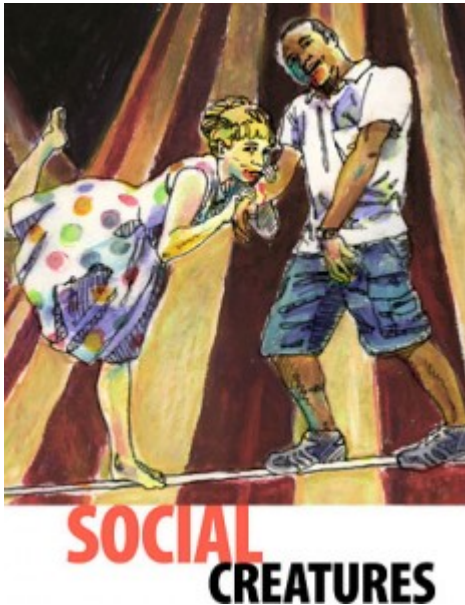
It's 1860, and the Buddhist King of Siam, feeling his kingdom becoming out of touch with the times, wants his children and wives educated in the modern, "scientific" way of the West. Anna arrives, but refuses to be intimidated by the King's demands on her. She keeps a distance with her employer, rarely moving within a 20-foot radius of him.

Interestingly, a combination of his persistent curiosity for Western culture and her increasing awareness of her freedom from Victorian English mores ("Oh my, I'm dancing in front of a man. That would never be allowed where I come from.") bring them together for engaging discussions about their different cultures and points of view.

Though none of this probably ever took place - the reality suggested by earlier accounts is that the King caused messes everywhere he went and Anna spent much of her time cleaning them up - there is joy in watching these very believable characters discover for the first time that the walls they used to live behind are no longer there.

The King and I plays at Ocean State Theatre April 24 through May 19 at 1245 Jefferson Boulevard, Warwick

[Social Creatures at Trinity Rep](#)



Trinity Rep's new horror play about society is interesting and ambitious. It challenges us to think about what trade-offs we make in order to be members of society, but shies away from ever making us truly horrified by the results.

The apocalypse has come and people have organized into two groups: those living inside and those wandering outside. In a large abandoned building, six individuals reluctantly dwell together. For survival reasons, their conversation is always formal, almost exclusively revolving around obtaining necessities or fixing equipment. "Is the generator fixed?" "Who stole cans from the pantry?"

Mrs. Williams (Nance Williamson) is constantly at odds with Mrs. Wilson (Janice Duclos), who pilfers canned goods from time to time. The other inhabitants are Mr. Johnson (Timothy Crowe), a cantankerous old man to whom Mrs. Williams often looks for help, Mrs. Smith (Rebecca Gibel), a

dreamer, Mr. Jones (Alexander Platt) and Mrs. Jones (D'Arcy Dersham). Playwright Jackie Sibbles gives a nod to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* by writing in Mr. Brown (Darrien Battle), an African-American drifter looking for safe haven. Brown's appearance and subsequent quarantine provide a target for the group to vent their repressed personal wants.

Eventually, tensions escalate to a point where bloodshed is inevitable. Unfortunately, Sibbles and production director Laura Smith never let us experience this point as a powerful unsettling moment. What we get instead is a splatter scene played for laughs.

Sibbles and Smith do better in the revealing character moments department. For instance, during one of the character monologues, conveyed via stage monitors, Mrs. Smith laments losing a guitar she once owned. As she reaches a hand toward the monitor in darkness, her spoken line, "I love that guitar," loops abruptly into, "I love, I love, love, I love..." ad infinitum through fade out.

Social Creatures runs through April 21. 201 Washington Street, Providence. 351-4242, www.trinityrep.com.

[Jesus Christ Superstar, a Holiday Favorite, Delivers](#)

If there's one thing Marquee Theatre Productions didn't skimp on in its performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, it was production design. Director Roberto Santo Cristo Soares' lustful production design sets the right tone for themes of power and corruption. There's rarely a scene with fewer than 10 harlots on stage flaunting their wares to the audience in black teddies or shiny silver tube tops. Of course, the much younger girls in the mob just wear sexy themed items, like light purple mascara and bright red burlesque scarves. In short, there are enough Halloween costume ideas here for quite a few years coming.

There's not much else missing here. The principle roles of Judas (Brian Lopes) and Mary Magdalene (Jerilyn Karam-Kozak) have notably strong voices and a driving rock score to guide them. Nick Kozak's Jesus is friend to the oppressed, and distraught by the thought of his inevitable crucifixion.

The only major drawback will be for Christian viewers unfamiliar with musical who will likely be disappointed when they see how secular Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice's story of Jesus actually is. Other than that, if you're a fan of large rock musicals, Marquee's *Superstar* is worth the night out.