

Bay Area theater this spring aims to remind audiences what it is to be human

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Noelle Viñas works out last-minute set preparations before opening night of “Apocalypse, Please,” a play written, directed and produced by Viñas and Kevin Vincenti at PianoFight in San Francisco. Photo: Leah Millis / The Chronicle 2017

Political and public health leaders might be telling us we’re close to getting through this pandemic, but it’s not clear who we’ll be when we get to the other side.

Good thing theater excels at reminding us what it is to be human. It connects us to our past and to our future, to our families and to strangers, to our best and worst selves.

This spring, Bay Area theater grounds us in who we are outside of machines, in our foundational literature and in our ancestors.

‘Every Time I Feel the Spirit’

An early tense exchange in Noelle Viñas' new play hinges on a cracker and a cup of grape juice. How might a small church reimagine communion for pandemic-era digital services? And how does that answer change if the pastor is new, butting up against longtime elders, in a denomination that sees few female pastors, let alone lesbian ones such as Gabriela (Vero Maynez)?

Shotgun Players commissioned this world premiere to be written specifically for Zoom, and Viñas and director Elizabeth Carter occasionally cast the audience in the role of church congregants.

April 2-11. \$8-\$40. 510-841-6500. www.shotgunplayers.org.



Author Toni Morrison attends a conference at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico. Photo: Guillermo Arias / Associated Press 2005

'The Bluest Eye'

On the 50th anniversary of Toni Morrison's knockout first novel, Aurora Theatre Company presents an audio adaptation penned by Lydia R. Diamond, whose crackling "Toni Stone" was canceled just after its opening night at American Conservatory Theater in the early days of the pandemic.

If you take a look at the cast list for “The Bluest Eye,” each successive name might give you its own frisson of joy: Michael J. Asberry, Sam Jackson, Cathleen Riddley, Jeunée Simon and Jasmine Milan Williams.

April 9-May 21. \$25. 510-843-4822. www.auroratheatre.org.



Heather Christian Photo: Maria Baranova /

‘Animal Wisdom’

Performer and composer Heather Christian likes to begin her bio by saying that she’s the daughter of a go-go dancer and a blues musician. Another bit of family history: Her female predecessors could supposedly speak to the dead.

If she, too, has that ability, she tries to access it through song in “Animal Wisdom,” a blend of cabaret and seance whose 2017 Bushwick Starr production is being made into a film by American Conservatory Theater and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

Raw, tart lead vocals backed by creamy harmonies deliver jagged lyrics: “Grandmother is a red bird”; “praise be the wrecking ball.”

On-demand streaming begins May 15. \$20. 415-749-2228. www.act-sf.org.



Pseuda, one of the artists featured in CounterPulse’s Combustible Residency 2021 Installation, is pictured at Pro Arts Gallery. Photo: Becca Reilly / CounterPulse

Combustible Residency 2021 Installation

If you want to check out the two pieces CounterPulse is mounting as part of this year’s Combustible Residency, which is dedicated to the intersection of art and technology, you have two options: You can either go in person, in one pod of up to four people at a time, or you can catch a live stream from home.

That in-person and digital hybrid might prove a trailblazing late-pandemic performance mode, as Bay Area counties advance to less-restrictive tiers, as per the state’s reopening color system. And it’s a fitting mode for the Combustible Residency, which features “Human/ID” by Berlin-based StratoFyzika, about what happens to our sense of corporeal self when we live our lives online, and “Are:era” by drag artist Pseuda, which imagines a lone protagonist surrounded by cameras in a dystopian universe run by machines.

*In person April 14-18. Live stream 5 p.m. April 16. Free-\$69.99. 415-626-2060.
<https://counterpulse.org>*



Theater artist Denmo Ibrahim on a hike near her Mill Valley home. Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle 2020

‘Brilliant Mind’

This winter, Mill Valley theater artist Denmo Ibrahim and her brother finally learned more about their father — after he died.

He was absent for most of her life, and with the news of his death, she got the chance to sketch a picture of his life, going through his home, his belongings. Now, under the aegis of Marin Theatre Company and Storykrapht (a new company that Ibrahim and Marti Wigder Grimminck run), she’s writing a play that traces a similar narrative.

In “Brilliant Mind,” world-shifting family secrets come to light as two siblings try to figure out how to mark the loss of a person they never knew to begin with.

May 11-23. \$30. 415-388-5208. www.marintheatre.org

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