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Fred Sullivan, Jr. in Boston's Lyric Stage's recent production of "The Book of Will." PHOTO Mark S. Howard

# A Most Rare Vision

Actor and director Fred Sullivan, Jr. celebrates lifelong love for Shakespeare at Warwick RI's Gamm Theatre

Rhode Island-based actor and director Fred Sullivan, Jr. is the embodiment of New England theater history.

The Chelsea, Mass. native first fell in love with the stage as an eight-year-old spending summers at his family's Cape Cod home and came of age during the heyday of Trinity Rep in Providence where he was a resident member for 35 years, appearing in more than 100 shows.

"I loved Trinity with all my heart. I began under founder Adrian Hall, then with [subsequent artistic directors] Anne Bogart, Dick Jenkins, then Oskar Eustis for 11 years where I learned so much. He [now] runs the Public Theater in New York for a reason because he may be a genius," says Sullivan.

Just as vital to his development has been Sullivan's long association with Commonwealth Shakespeare Company (CSC), which performs outdoors on the Boston Common. He won the Elliot Norton Award as outstanding actor in 2008 for his

Jaques in "As You Like It." Sullivan's first role at CSC was Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in 2007 and he's starred in Shakespeare's popular comedy four other times, three as Bottom and once as Oberon.

In May, coming full circle with the play that has been one of his professional touchstones, Sullivan for the first time will direct "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for the Gamm Theatre in Warwick RI, where he's been resident director since 1996.

"Shakespeare runs deep in the blood. I have nine to go. He wrote 37 plays and I've been in 28," says Sullivan. He credits his father Fred Sullivan (whose own love for classic theater was nurtured during his student years at Boston College) for introducing his son to "O'Neill and Shakespeare and Williams from when I was young. I can't imagine my life without it," he says.

Audiences around New England would agree.

Sullivan, who lives in Providence with his husband of many years, artist Rico Carroccio, has played many of the great roles of the stage, from Gloucester in "King Lear" to James Tyrone, Jr. in "Long Day's Journey into Night" to Joe Pitt in "Angels in America." In March, Sullivan appeared in the Lyric Stage Company of Boston's production of Lauren Gunderson's "The Book of Will," about an intrepid group that, against all odds, compiles what would become Shakespeare's First Folio seven years after his death.

Sullivan, who earned a BFA in 1982 from Hofstra University and teaches acting and theater production at RISD, isn't the kind of director who tries to improve on Shakespeare. But he promises an adventurous "Midsummer" at the Gamm. The diverse cast is made up of "a glorious bunch of people," including Gamm artistic director Tony Estrella as Bottom and the CSC's Nora Eschenheimer as Helena, both of whom starred in Shakespeare's rarely produced "Cymbeline" that CSC artistic director Steven Maler tapped Sullivan to direct in 2019.

“Tony is an incredible actor, so I cast him as Bottom. I wanted to see him play the most joyful character Shakespeare wrote,” he says. “It’s set in ancient Greece. Shakespeare was trying to write a Greek comedy; he loved Greek comedy. ... I didn’t want to change words or plot, but it’s misogynistic.” Sullivan’s production will be faithful but will emphasize explorations of sexuality and gender, aided by the casting of a woman, Deborah Martin, a CSC regular, as Oberon. “The fairies are basically Gods. So let’s make them gender fluid; feral,” he says. “The whole play is about love and sexual identity; it’s sexy and romantic but not like cherubs. It’s rough and dark.”

Sullivan has a deep respect for actors, both as a director and teacher. His work, especially interpreting Eugene O’Neill, has been influenced by renowned O’Neill actors Jason Robards, Brian Dennehy and Nathan Lane. Seeing Dennehy and Lane in O’Neill’s masterpiece “The Iceman Cometh” at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2012 remains a defining theater experience for him.

The ever-busy Sullivan played Mr. Aslaksen when the Gamm reopened in



Fred Sullivan, Jr.

2021 after an 18-month pandemic pause for the world premiere of “A Lie Agreed Upon,” Estrella’s adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s 1882 political drama, “An Enemy of the People.”

“Then I directed a show for RISD and then went right into “The Book of Will,”” he says. Among his favorite experiences during the shutdown were the regular Zoom

gatherings with area actors where they read plays out loud, including “The Iceman Cometh” with Sullivan as Hickey. “It’s the American Lear,” he says. “It was extraordinary. There was no audience; we just did it for each other. My heart grew 10 sizes.” [X]

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