

WOW Festival
production of
Choreo & Fly,
from Disco Riot



THE WOW FACTOR

San Diego Symphony Hosts La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival at The Rady Shell BY STEPHANIE SAAD THOMPSON

SINCE ITS LAUNCH 10 years ago, La Jolla Playhouse's biennial, free **Without Walls (WOW) Festival** has fulfilled its promise to lead performing arts enthusiasts outside the traditional confines of theater walls to unusual or unexpected places. Locations for its eclectic and innovative programming have included the backseat of a car, a basketball court and a local beach. The most recent WOW Festival was a series of pop-ups that took place throughout the Arts District at Liberty Station. Audience members might find

themselves drawn into being part of the performance—at a dance party, for instance, or walking through a lush botanical garden.

So, you might wonder what's untraditional about the 2023 WOW, which is being presented this year in and around San Diego's most eye-catching new performance venue: the San Diego Symphony's outdoor home—The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park—April 27–30. Well, what if you, the audience, were on stage under that signature curving white shell; while the performers were

out in the seating area? Or what if the artists were to incorporate San Diego Bay as part of their work?

"One of the things I love the most is artists finding inspiration in all kinds of spaces and places," says Christopher Ashley, La Jolla Playhouse's Rich Family Artistic Director. He spearheaded the creation of the WOW Festival in 2013. "We'll see performers using the spaces in and around The Rady Shell in surprising ways, turning the space on its head. Nothing will be the way you're used to seeing shows there."

SAM ZAUSCHER



The 2023 WOW Festival unfolds at The Rady Shell.

"When we began planning to open The Rady Shell, we always thought of it as a gift to San Diego, and part of our desire and mission is to activate The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park with free performances and programming open to the San Diego region," says Martha Gilmer, San Diego Symphony CEO. "Working with the La Jolla Playhouse to host the WOW Festival at The Rady Shell offers a tremendous diversity of free cultural experiences for the city—in addition to our other San Diego Symphony programming. We are committed to innovation and creativity, and the WOW Festival symbolizes the embracing of the new. We could not be more excited to see what this year's WOW Festival will

bring to the community."

Ashley says he has been in talks with the Symphony for years about creating a collaboration. "The Shell is such an important, iconic space right on the water," he says. "Its design and location can't help but inspire artists in new ways. For example, one of the pieces, *salty water*, by Blindspot Collective, weaves music, movement, spoken testimony and poetry to explore our community's history and connection to the sea."

"Since The Rady Shell opened in the summer of 2021, both Christopher Ashley and [La Jolla Playhouse Managing Director] Debby Buchholz have frequently attended concerts at the venue," Gilmer adds. "They have both

shared their love for this new space and our organizations felt like a collaboration with La Jolla Playhouse and the San Diego Symphony was meant to happen at some point. WOW seemed like the perfect opportunity for a collaboration."

Taking place over four days, WOW 2023 includes theater, dance, music, puppetry and more; along with family-friendly programming. One highlight is the world premiere of *La Lucha*, a new interactive experience by award-winning designer David Israel Reynoso and his immersive theatrical company, Optika Moderna. Presented in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD), it's the WOW /CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

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Festival's only ticketed event. It takes place at MCASD's downtown location—a short shuttle ride from The Rady Shell. Inspired by *lucha libre*—the Mexican wrestling performance in which professional wrestlers use masks and high-flying maneuvers to entertain audiences—*La Lucha* will take visitors on a voyage to experience ringside thrills and backstage secrets. After the festival, *La Lucha* will open to the public in May.

Ashley and Gilmer are both excited about *A Shared Space*, a program by Ryan Carter in which the San Diego Symphony will perform. Carter will transform cell phones into instruments, as the audience joins Symphony musicians as players in a communal performance—aiming to enhance a sense of togetherness that develops by being in the audience of a live musical performance.

"Of course, we are looking forward to many of the events at this year's WOW Festival," says Gilmer, "But we're particularly proud of the program that our Symphony musicians will perform; and the collaboration between our two organizations to put this incredible event together."

PATRICK MUELLER



WOW production *The End*
(Control Group Productions)

Other highlights of the 2023 Wow Festival:

Birdmen, from the Close-Act Theatre Company, The Netherlands, features huge, illuminated creatures that are operated by mysterious men. Their movement and colors are synchronized—as if programmed for a mission. Their glowing bodies react to their environment, and they seem to communicate in colors.

Choreo & Fly, from San Diego's Disco Riot, combines performance with an activity that allows audience members to engage in something physical between short dance performances (by local movement artists) in a unique combination of dance and kite-flying. Spectators will have the opportunity to move their bodies, enjoy physical expression and build community through movement.

Circular Dimensions, from Cristopher Cichocki, who is based in the Coachella Valley, harnesses elements of the natural world as well as industrial mutation as primary

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mediums; alongside original compositions fused into Cichocki's DJ sets that embrace sonic ambience and experimental dance genres. *Circular Dimensions* will map the surrounding environment with monumental video projections experienced in chroma-depth 3D.

Diversory Theatre's *Drive*—an immersive theater experience based on Broadway veteran Sharon Wheatley's book *Drive*—chronicles her real-life, pandemic-necessitated cross-country RV trip with her wife and family. Unfolding around a 30-foot RV, this warm and funny play follows the two women as they struggle to set up a campsite; all the while tackling discussions of family, the loss of working in live theater, and how to manage the great outdoors.

The End, from Control Group Productions in Denver, hijacks a traditional civic bus tour to take audiences on a ride through a city transformed by escalating climate catastrophe—rolling toward the brink of collapse. Exploring our city's present and futures, *The End* seeks refuge from the rising storm in an interactive expedition visiting multiple sites in a custom-renovated, apocalyptic school bus.



WOW production *The NEST*,
from Megan Flød Johnson

Petra and Nati's *Las Cuatro Milpas* restaurant in Barrio Logan is a local landmark and a long-time favorite among San Diego food enthusiasts. In *Las Cuatro Milpas*, San Diego's TuYo Theatre creates an immersive journey through a corn maze inspired by the restaurant that bridges ancient Aztec mythology with the American dream. Audiences enter a maze modeled on Aztec codices and covered in murals that tell the journey of the Estudillo family—from Mexico to California.

Aimed at families with children, *The NEST*, from St. Paul's Megan Flød Johnson, is an immersive playscape for young people and their communities to explore the identity and home of an elusive and migrating "Creature." Children can explore ideas through unstructured play and hands-on making guided by a cohort of *NEST* facilitators.

WOW Festival 2023 takes place April 27-30. For more info, visit wowfestival.org and theshell.org.

JESSICA GRAY MARTIN PHOTO (WALKERARTS CENTER)