

The Mercy Seat, by Neil LaBute & Sight Unseen, by Donald Margulies

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Readers' Theatre Presents Two Weekends of Two Award-Wining Love Stories

For the first time since its inception in 2010, The Readers' Theatre will perform two modern plays, in repertoire, over two weekends: *The Mercy Seat*, by Neil LaBute and *Sight Unseen*, by Donald Margulies. The productions premiere Friday, December 7th, with alternating matinee and evening performances.

The Mercy Seat was among the first major theatrical responses to the September 11, 2001 attacks. Set on September 12, it concerns Ben, a man who worked at the World Trade Center but was away from the office during the attack, with his mistress, Abby, who is also his boss. Expecting that his family believes that he was killed in the towers' collapse, Ben contemplates using the tragedy to run away and start a new life with his lover.

The Mercy Seat is directed by *The Ithaca Times* film critic **Bryan VanCampen** and assistant directed by theatre/film director and Readers' Theatre Associate Artistic Director, **Eric Sterbenk**. The two-person play will star professional theatre actors: **Anne Marie Cummings**, The Readers' Theatre's founder and artistic director, and **Tony Simone**, a professional actor with the company and president of the board.

The 2002 NYC Off-Broadway production starred Sigourney Weaver and Liev Schreiber. *Newsday* called *The Mercy Seat*, "uncomfortable yet fascinating...provocative...sharp, compelling and more than a little chilling." Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* compared *The Mercy Seat* to Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

"My favorite types of plays are those that keep audiences on the edges of their seats, and *The Mercy Seat* does just that given all of LaBute's usual twists and turns," said Cummings, adding that the backdrop of September 11 adds an element of tension outside these characters' lives while on the inside they grapple with the meaning of their love affair.

Peter Rothbart, composition professor from the school of music at Ithaca College, has composed a score for the production—creating a sonic environment that supports the mood for this relationship play. VanCampen looks forward to working with LaBute's challenging piece "that flies in the face of sanctimony and political correctness," he said.

Tim Perry, Associate Artistic Director of The Readers' Theatre, is directing *Sight Unseen*. **Sterbenk** will assistant direct this play as well. *Sight Unseen* is about Jonathan Waxman, superstar artist, who, just before his works are celebrated at an exhibition in London, journeys to the village where his former lover, Patricia, lives with her British husband. In Patricia's cold, remote house, Jonathan discovers an early painting of Patricia that he'd done when they were young lovers. In scenes that dart from past to present and back, the characters are forced to deal with questions of anti-Semitism and the sadness of lost love.

This four-person play features a number of newcomers to The Readers' Theatre: **Effie Johnson** (*she had a role in the Broadway production of Julius Caesar starring Denzel Washington*), local actor **Matt Winberg**, **Siouxie Easter** (*acting professor at Wells College*), and **Scott Whitham** (*former acting member of The Wooster Group in NYC*).

Nate Marshall, of the popular local band **Nate & Kate**, will bring the raw blues and country sounds of his harmonica LIVE to this production. Marshall adds that he looks forward to the "challenge of composing and performing" with his "diatonic mouth piano" completely unaccompanied.

Johnson plays the role of Patricia and is excited to explore the multi-layered play. "It seems simple at first," she said, "but it progressively unfolds and deepens in terms of its characters and key messages."

Local supporting sponsors for these two plays are **Cinemapolis**, **Finger Lakes ReUse**, and for a second time supporting a Readers' Theatre play about art and artists, **State of the Art Gallery**.

Following each production, subject experts will elaborate upon each playwright's themes and primary messages. Local psychologist, **Rebecca Golding** and Rothbart will speak following *The Mercy Seat*. Rothbart's talk-back is entitled, "Composing Music: Linking Dramatic Events," and Golding's is, "The Psychology Behind the Falling Out and Formation of Relationships During Tragic Events." **Stephanie Wiles**, newly appointed director of the Herbert Johnson Museum at Cornell University, will speak following *Sight Unseen* about "Art, Commerce, Sensationalism." (see website for free talk-back schedule)

Performance readings of *The Mercy Seat* and *Sight Unseen* take place at THE SPACE, 700 West Buffalo Street. *The Mercy Seat* begins on Friday, December 7th at 8 pm, and will be performed on December 8th (3pm), 9th (6:30pm), 14th (8pm), and 16th (3pm). *Sight Unseen* starts December 8th at 8pm and continues on December 9th (3pm), 15th (8pm), and 16th (6:30pm). All tickets are \$12 with a reservation and \$15 at the door. Reservations are recommended as seating is limited, and can be made by calling 607.217.6272. www.thereaderstheatre.com.

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