

PICCOLO SPOLETO 2021

May 28-June 13

Sundown Poetry Series

brings spoken word
to Gibbes Museum

Charleston-area
dance companies
pair up for outdoor
festival performances

And more!

FIRST OF TWO

**Official
Program
Guide**

PICCOLO PICKS

Outdoor Art
Exhibition

Craft Show

Charleston
Fanfare at
Cannon
Park

Juried Art
Exhibition

Wragg
Square
Musical
Program



A special
publication of



Piccolo Spoleto

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who dream of a brighter tomorrow
through the performing arts.**



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Welcome to the 2021 Piccolo Spoleto Festival, where we proudly advance a legacy spanning 43 years, during which time Charleston's local arts community has united each spring in the spirit of collaboration and partnership to create the perfect complement to the global aspirations of Spoleto Festival USA.

In a typical year, Piccolo Spoleto assembles some 500 performing, literary, and visual arts events, marking 17 days of unbridled creativity that animates our galleries and theatres, historic houses of worship, sequestered courtyards and gardens, and the City's beloved and beautiful parks. It is a Charleston tradition that endures and grows richer with each new season.



Obviously, the disruption of last year's cancellations and the uncertainties of navigating a global pandemic have made all of us recalibrate and adjust to new patterns of socially distant alternatives, not to mention the seemingly endless cycle of Zooms and unmitigated screen fatigue.

We are more humble and we recognize that the "little things" should not be taken for granted moving forward. So, it's truly wonderful that our Piccolo Spoleto Festival should afford us through countless small gestures and little bursts of delight the opportunity to come together safely and responsibly and celebrate as a community.

The arts are an intrinsic part of Charleston's collective DNA and they create a nearly sacred space of inspiration where meaningful connection and dialogue can emerge and persist. Many of the 2021 Piccolo Spoleto events will feel familiar, be that browsing the artists' tents at Marion Square, listening to great jazz, or enjoying a poetry reading in a beautiful garden as the evening sun fades. Other offerings will be maiden voyages for the festival, from lyrical, melodious strolls through our parks to high-spirited pop-up performances

and public art encounters in unexpected settings.

Perhaps most exciting, it is all just a hint of what is to follow over the course of the summer and as the 2021-2022 artistic season comes roaring back here in the Holy City in the months ahead.

Piccolo Spoleto would not be possible without the dedication and generosity of artists and arts enthusiasts throughout our community, and I want to acknowledge all of the outstanding artists and appreciative audience members who will make the 2021 Piccolo Spoleto Festival a resounding success. I also want to thank the staff of the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs and the team of dedicated community volunteers and arts leaders who bring Piccolo Spoleto to life.

We also salute the medical professionals, safety experts, front line workers, and City of Charleston staff who have worked behind the scenes to provide protocols and assessments to safeguard the well-being of our audiences and artists alike. A riotous round of applause to you all!

I very much hope you will join us in celebrating everything that Charleston and Piccolo Spoleto have to offer. I look forward to seeing you at the Festival.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John J. Tecklenburg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "J" and "T".

John J. Tecklenburg
Mayor

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About the Festival

PICCOLO
SPOLETO
2021

The Piccolo Spoleto Festival annually presents a varied program that includes visual arts exhibitions, performances of classical music, jazz, dance, theater, and choral music, as well as cultural events and community celebrations, poetry readings, children's activities, craft shows, and film screenings.

Piccolo Spoleto prioritizes accessibility for both artists and performers, presenting professional work of the highest standard, while ensuring that nearly half of Piccolo's events are admission-free, with the balance offered at affordable ticket prices, in a traditional year. With that said, Piccolo Spoleto is certainly going to look a little different this year. For one, all 2021 Piccolo Spoleto events are free to attend!

In addition to the Festival's visual arts, artisan crafts exhibitions, and public art installations, performances are being planned for outdoor settings in Charleston's parks. Events are scheduled for the City's larger parks in formats that accommodate social distancing and smaller neighborhood pop-up events will be announced the week of the event to ensure that the weather will accommodate the performance.

Piccolo Spoleto was launched in 1979 by the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs, which continues to work closely with an engaged group of volunteers from the Charleston arts community. The working group of arts professionals who serve as volunteer program coordinators for the Festival now numbers nearly forty, with each specializing in a particular discipline, genre, or period.

Applications for the 2022 Piccolo Spoleto Festival will be available online in the autumn at piccolospoleto.com.

For more information, call the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs at (843) 724-7305 or email CulturalAffairs@charleston-sc.gov

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CHLOE MISSELDINE AND JOSE SEBASTIAN IN LA FOLLIA VARIATIONS.
PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY.

Piccolo Spoleto salutes its 2020 and 2021 Sponsors

Piccolo Spoleto Festival is produced by the
City of Charleston



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Piccolo poetry series brings spoken word to Gibbes Museum courtyard

By Michael Smallwood

Throughout the month of June, Piccolo Spoleto will be presenting a series of poetry selections from some of the most renowned authors in the Southeast. The two-week engagement will feature live readings showcasing a new poet each day. These readings, free to the public, will take place in the Lenhardt Garden at the Gibbes Museum in downtown Charleston.

It's an all-star lineup of incredible authors this year.

Al Black, author of *Man with Two Shadows*, kicks off the series June 1. Black is a co-founder of Poets Respond to Race Initiative and was *Jasper Magazine's* Literary Artist of the Year in 2017. **Valerie Nieman** follows on June 2. She is a former National Endowment of the Arts fellow, author of four novels and teacher at North Carolina A&T State University.

H.R. Spencer will read from *The Color After Green* June 3. Published in 2019, this collection of contemporary nature poems reach for larger concerns of climate and ecological changes. June 4 brings us **Cornelius Eady**, Pulitzer Prize nominee and National Book Award finalist. Eady is the cofounder of Cave Canem, a literary ser-

vice organization dedicated to highlighting and advancing the literary work of African-American voices.

The following week on June 7, **Lola Haskins** lands in the Lenhardt Garden to read from her collection of 14 poetry books. An honorary chancellor of the Florida State Poets Association, Haskins is a recipient of the Emily Dickinson prize from the Poetry Society of America. Following Haskins is **David B. Axelrod**, a three-time Fulbright poet. Axelrod reads on June 8. June 9 belongs to **Kwoya Fagin Maples**, of Charleston. A Cave Canem fellow, her work, *Mend*, was a finalist for the 2019 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry.

June 10 sees **Grace C. Ocasio**, and the series ends on June 11 with **Ren Ruggiero**. Ruggiero, of Charleston, is the author of *Mermaid Daughter*, her first collection of poetry. Her work also appeared in *Kakalak 2017*, *Morbid Curiosity* and *Arcana: The Tarot Poetry Anthology*.

Ocasio, a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and Newberry native, will present readings from her books, *Hollerin' from This Shack*, *The Speed of Our Lives*, and *Family Reunion*.

Family Reunion, her second full-length

collection, tells the story of her lineage from both sides of her family. Highlighted among this work is her grandfather, a medical doctor, who founded the People's Hospital in 1937, a hospital that served the neglected African-American community in her hometown. The People's Hospital was the only hospital for Black people until the desegregation of Newberry County Memorial Hospital in 1952.

Ocasio's readings will include works from throughout her career as a writer, looking at her evolution through the years. The poems were born when she was a graduate student at Sarah Lawrence College to when she moved to Charlotte, and cover a great deal of her life.

"I am pleased to read in Charleston knowing that I have Southern roots via my family, who settled in Newberry, South Carolina," says Ocasio of presenting during the Piccolo Spoleto Festival this year.

The Poetry Series, like all of Piccolo, is making its return after missing the 2020 festival due to the pandemic. Ocasio's readings will not have any direct commentary on COVID itself.

"The three books I will be presenting on were written before the pandemic," she says when asked about the impact



Provided

Grace Ocasio's readings will be from works that span her career as a writer

the last year has had on her reading here. "Artistically, though, the pandemic showed me that I should persist in my endeavor to perform my work, no matter the obstacles in my way."

Fans of poetry left starved by the pandemic for direct interaction with readers and live sessions will no doubt be ready for this year's COVID-safe Piccolo Spoleto.



Black



Nieman



Spencer



Eady



Haskins



Axelrod



Maples



Ruggiero

Festival Staff

PICCOLO
SPOLETO
2021

Piccolo Spoleto Festival is produced and directed by the
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PICCOLO
SPOLETO
2021

Piccolo Spoleto Memorial Day Concert

A patriotic program featuring the
Charleston Concert Band

Monday, May 31 at 3pm
Hampton Park
Free to attend!



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Unbound Ballet Project and Annex Dance Company will join for this year's Piccolo Spoleto

Courtesy Unbound Ballet Project

Charleston-area dance companies pair up for outdoor festival performances

By Michael Smallwood

Piccolo Spoleto 2021 may have a completely different approach and shape, but that doesn't mean it is skimping on the quality of the offerings. Case in point: audiences will get to attend events like the May 31 Hampton Park Dance Program, featuring performances from two of Charleston's premiere dance companies, absolutely free.

Unbound Ballet Project was founded in 2017 by dancer, teacher and choreographer Crystal Wellman and debuted to sold-out audiences. The company has run successful and innovative summer seasons each year since, until COVID-19 put

a halt to 2020 plans.

Shifting gears and not wanting to rely on virtual presentation, Unbound staged *It Never Changes*, a ballet designed for outdoor spaces that it presented to live audiences in October at Tradesman Brewing

Company on King Street Extension. A bit different from the troupe's usual fare, *It Never Changes* is a selection of four different female choreographers who gathered to create a ballet show specifically for the new outdoor space.

Eight dancers will be featured in an abridged version of *It Never Changes* to the Hampton Park program this month. Since the show was originally designed to be performed outdoors, Unbound won't need to adjust to the new venue.

"We're just really excited that we're even getting to do Piccolo this year," says Wellman of the opportunity to stage the show again.

"We are so lucky that we live in a city where we have these outdoor places that people can come and still enjoy the arts and still keep life moving the best we can."

Annex Dance Company, founded in 2010 by artist director Kristin Alexander, also saw its season drastically altered by COVID-19.

Annex was forced to move most of its live performance plans over to the medium of dance filmmaking.



Alexander

The hope for a bigger project earlier this spring unfortunately fell through, but now it can return to live performance with *Take the A-Train*. Originally planned for last year, *A-Train* will be making its debut during Piccolo this year.

Take the A-Train is a piece in collaboration with visual artist Mary Walker and composer Michael Wall. It is built around rearranged jazz standards and explores the time of the Jazz Age through modern dance. It's the first time since the onset of the pandemic that Annex will allow physical partnering between dancers.

"This is our first time with physical connection as a company," said Alexander. "I think the first lift that I did ... the whole room kind of lit up. Everyone was smiling and excited."

Much like Unbound, Annex doesn't see any issue with bringing its show to an audience outside. *Take the A-Train* was also planned to be performed in an outdoor space, and so faces no challenges or shifts because of the venue. There are six performers slated to take part in *Take the A-Train*.

Both companies are excited to be working together at Hampton Park. "Always honored to be included in anything that's collaborative with other artists in the city, so it's cool that we're doing it with Annex," says Wellman of the opportunity to present this joint show highlighting two distinct styles of dance.

Alexander echoes that enthusiasm. "I'm so excited to be sharing this event with them," says Alexander. "We have so much respect for each other as companies and try to support each other as best we can. The fact that we're gonna be putting this

Annex Dance Company will debut its production of 'Take the A-Train' during the fest

“We are so lucky that we live in a city where we have these outdoor places that people can come and still enjoy the arts and still keep life moving the best we can.” —Crystal Wellman

program together for people to see two companies doing something, I think, is pretty great.”

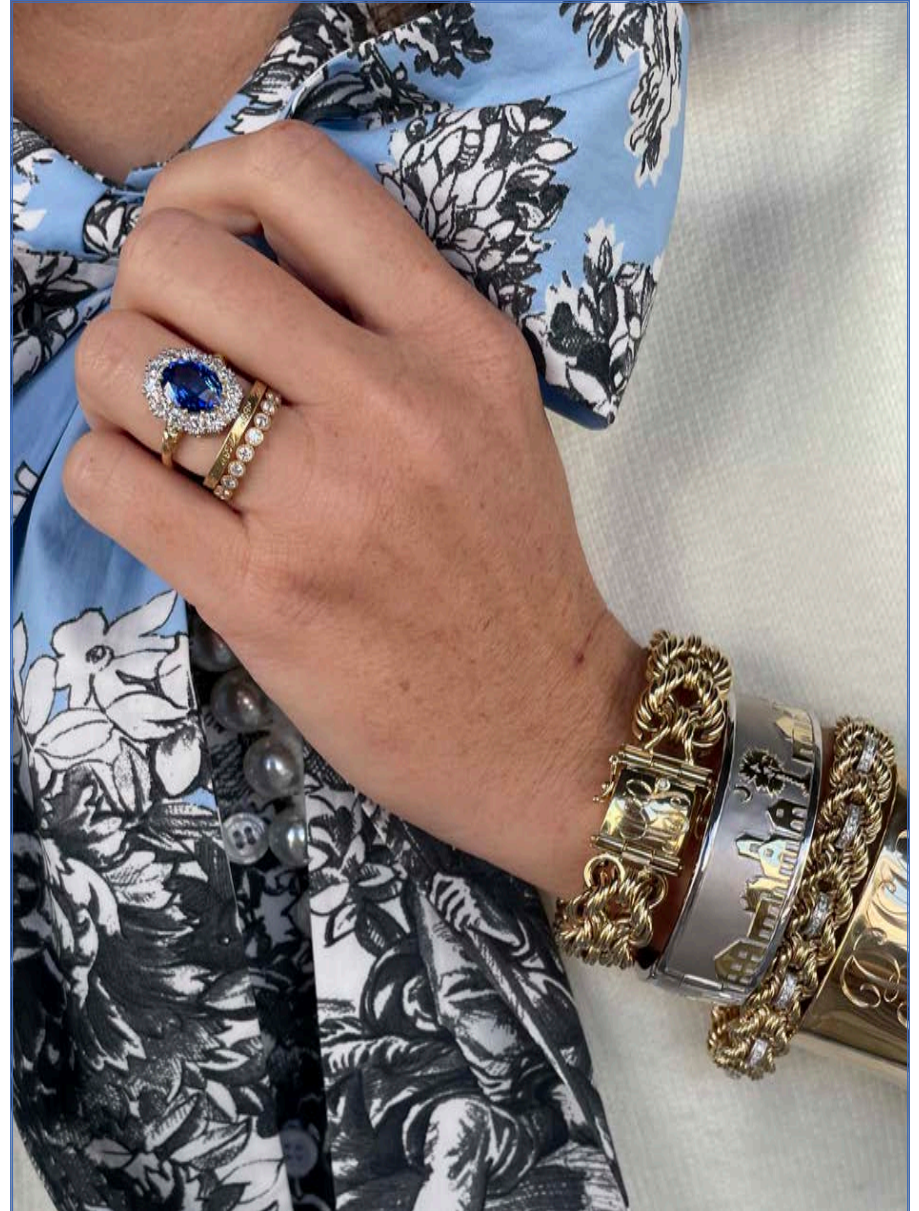
As with everything else during Piccolo Spoleto this year, the one-night performance will be free to all audiences. Masks will be required for attendance.



Samantha Campbell



William Long



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Day by Day

Charleston's Piccolo Spoleto Festival returns in 2021 with a slate of all-free, all-outdoor performances and safe, pandemic-friendly exhibitions that will scratch that itch you've been feeling to get out and experience the Holy City's creative community.

This year's Piccolo Spoleto Festival includes a number of surprise pop-ups around Charleston, a series of unique outdoor poetry recitations downtown and performances you likely won't see even as precautions are phased out and the festival returns in 2022. And of course, Piccolo Spoleto features the outdoor arts exhibition that you know and love in Marion Square, with two weekends of crafts markets nearby.

Some programs, such as Spotlight Concert Series and Rising Stars, will be presented virtually. The City of Charleston will also be cross-promoting, through its online "Arts in Charleston" calendar, a number of events and performances by independent arts groups and ensembles during the festival, including free and ticketed events.

These events are being continuously updated at **charlestonarts.org**, so check frequently and support all of our local artists.

All Piccolo Spoleto Festival events are free and open to the public.

Every day

Piccolo Spoleto Outdoor Art Exhibition

Marion Square
329 Meeting St. Downtown.
Mon.-Thurs, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
Fri.-Sun., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.
Note: Sun., June 13 is an optional day for exhibitors.

Piccolo Spoleto Juried Art Exhibition

Charleston City Gallery
34 Prioleau St. Downtown.
12-5 p.m.

Public Art: Enough Pie

Vivian Moultrie Playground
1201 King St. Downtown.

Public Art: Tiger Strikes Asteroid

West Ashley Greenway

Friday, May 28

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Charleston Fanfare

Cannon Park
131 Rutledge Ave. Downtown.
6 p.m.

Kick off Piccolo Spoleto 2021 with a celebration of Charleston's iconic musical traditions with CSO brass, Gracie & Lacy, and more.

Saturday, May 29

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Sunday, May 30

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Musical Program

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
12 p.m.

A delightful offering from local talents working in a range of styles.

Classical Promenade

Hampton Park
30 Mary Murray Blvd.
6 p.m.

Enjoy a leisurely evening stroll punctuated by performances featuring Charleston's finest classical musicians, including Yuriy Bekker and CSO string quartet, a trio led by CSO principal flutist Jessica Hull-Dambaugh, and "Social Distance-SING" with Holy City Arts & Lyric Opera.

Monday, May 31

Memorial Day Concert

Hampton Park
30 Mary Murray Blvd. Downtown.
3 p.m.
Celebrate Memorial Day with a stirring patriotic concert performed by the Charleston Concert Band. *Note change in venue for 2021.*

Dance Programs

Hampton Park
30 Mary Murray Blvd. Downtown.
7 p.m.
Annex Dance Company and Unbound Ballet Collective share the bill for this evening of contemporary work, including premiere work and pieces in re-imagined settings.

Tuesday, June 1

SUNDOWN POETRY

Al Black
Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art
135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

Al Black has published two poetry collections, *I Only Left for Tea* (2014) and *Man with Two Shadows* (2018), in addition to co-editing *Hand in Hand, Poets Respond to Race* (2017) and being published in anthologies, journals and periodicals. He hosts arts events, co-founded Poets Respond to Race Initiative and was *Jasper Magazine's* Literary Artist of the Year (2017).

Wednesday, June 2

SUNDOWN POETRY

Valerie Nieman
Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art
135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

Valerie Nieman's third poetry collection, *Leopard Lady: A Life in Verse*, includes work

that was featured in *The Missouri Review*. Her fourth novel, *To the Bones*, was published in 2019. A graduate of Queens University of Charlotte, she has held National Endowment for the Arts and other fellowships, and teaches at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro.

"An Enchanting Evening in the Garden"

William Enston Homes
900 King St. Downtown.
5 p.m.

Presented by the Housing Authority of the City of Charleston, "An Enchanting Evening in the Garden" will feature performances by the Plantation Singers, saxophonist Gavin Smith, a storyteller, as well as Sasha and the Dream Team Band.

Thursday, June 3

SUNDOWN POETRY

H.R. Spencer
Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art
135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

H.R. "Randy" Spencer will read from *The Color After Green*, published in 2019 by Finishing Line Press. Recently featured on SCETV's *By the River*, this collection of contemporary nature poems are both personal and reach for larger concerns around climate and ecological changes, sometimes set in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Friday, June 4

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Family Fun on the Greenway

West Ashley Greenway at Farmfields Avenue
6 p.m.

Come join the festivities on the West Ashley Greenway with art, activities, and music by The Charlestons.

SUNDOWN POETRY

Kurtis Lamkin
Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art
135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

Kurtis Lamkin is a widely anthologized

Note Out of necessity, this year's schedule is subject to changes, with additions and tweaks expected in the coming weeks. Be sure to check back with the *City Paper* and the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs for the latest up-to-date information.

piccolospoleto.com
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poet and kora player whose recordings include *Queen of Carolina* and *Korapoems*. His animated poem, *The Foxes Manifesto*, aired on PBS for two years, and he was featured in the Bill Moyers documentary, *Fooling with Words*. He was poet-in-residence at The New School and Bourne poetry chair at Georgia Tech.

Saturday, June 5

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Sunday, June 6

Piccolo Spoleto Crafts Show

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Musical Program

Wragg Square
342 Meeting St. Downtown.
2 p.m.

A showcase of youth performers highlighting emerging voices and rising prodigies.

Operatic Delights

Cannon Park
131 Rutledge Ave. Downtown.
6 p.m.

An inspired evening celebrating the grandeur of opera with a light-hearted spirit and boundless passion.

Monday, June 7

SUNDOWN POETRY

Lola Haskins

Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art
135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

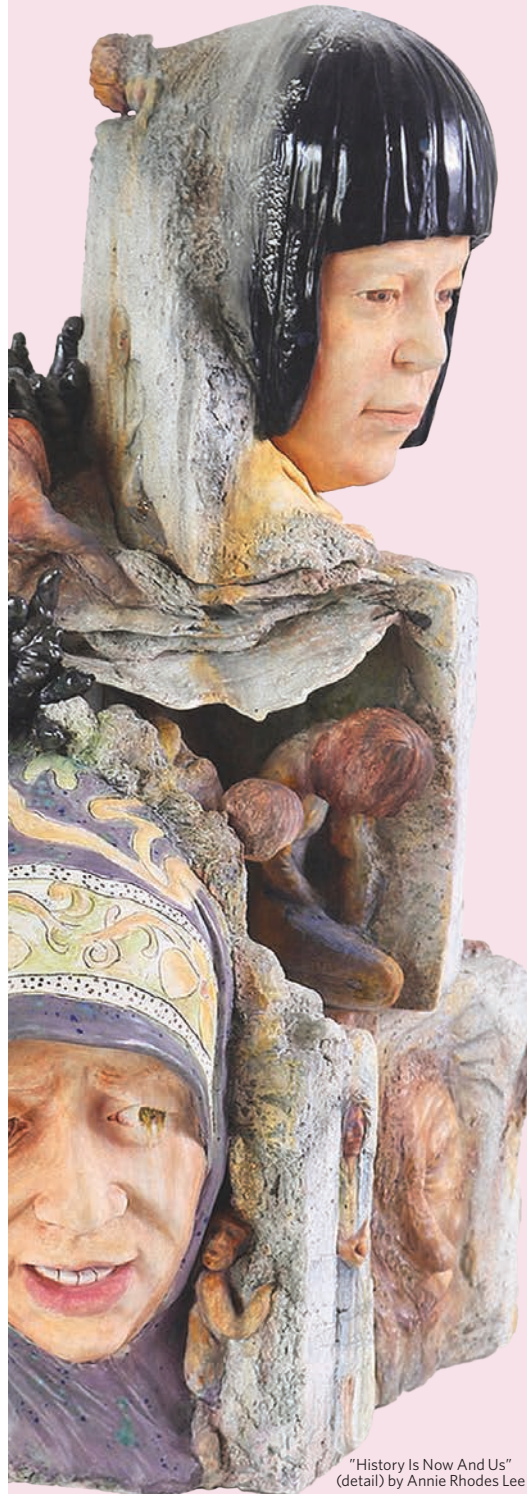
Lola Haskins (lolahaskins.com) has published 17 books, 14 of which are poetry. Her past honors include the Iowa Poetry Prize, two Florida Book Awards, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and the Emily Dickinson prize from Poetry Society of America. She serves as honorary chancellor of the Florida State Poets Association.

Piccolo Picks

Piccolo Spoleto 2021 won't be anything like you're used to experiencing. Blame the pandemic. But the annual festival will still offer a wide variety of art experiences, says Scott Watson, director of the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs, which produces the annual event that draws thousands to the city.

"Everything is free this year so come out and enjoy it," he says. "It's not going to look like past years and it's going to be different, but it's still going to be a whole lot of fun."

While this year's show will include many "pop-up" events announced at the last moment for neighborhoods around the Holy City, here are five things you can count on to make memories that will last for years to come:



"History Is Now And Us"
(detail) by Annie Rhodes Lee

Piccolo Spoleto Juried Art Exhibition

Piccolo Spoleto 2021 will host its annual Juried Art Exhibition from May 28 to June 13 to highlight the recent work of artists across South Carolina. Dontre Major, a Charleston artist who has exhibited in past Piccolo juried shows, will serve as this year's juror. Guests are requested to reserve free tickets in advance by visiting: citygalleryatwaterfrontpark.com.

Opens May 28. Hours: Noon to 5 p.m. Charleston City Gallery, 34 Pringleau St., Downtown.

Piccolo Spoleto Outdoor Art Exhibition

Marion Square will again be transformed into an open-air art market, featuring works by some of the finest local artists in Charleston. Free to all, guests will be allowed to walk through and check out artists' tents, observing art of many styles. There will be displays by more 60 artists who will also be selling their work. If you're looking for some good values, interesting conversations with artists and a relaxing atmosphere on a spring day, this is the place to visit.

Opens May 28. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays through Sundays. Marion Square, 329 Meeting St. Downtown.



Alvin Glen

Piccolo Spoleto Craft Show

The annual craft show will take place over two weekends. Baskets, centerpieces, jewelry, clothing and more will be on display and for sale from some of the most innovative and creative craft artists in and around Charleston. You'll find the perfect treat for yourself or a special gift for a friend or loved one in this diverse, exciting craft display.

Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on May 28 and May 29; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on May 30. On the second weekend, the show will have similar times. Wragg Square, 342 Meeting St. Downtown.

Charleston Fanfare at Cannon Park

Gracie & Lacy, a familiar and talented Charleston vocal and dance duo, will be on hand to help kickoff the 2021 Piccolo Spoleto Festival with a show at Cannon Park on May 28. Joined by the Charleston Symphony brass and more, Gracie & Lacy will bring their classic flavor to audiences in this free mini-concert.

May 28, 6 p.m. Cannon Park, 131 Rutledge Ave. Downtown.



Provided

Wragg Square Musical Program

Audiences will be able to enjoy live music by local classical artists at Wragg Square on May 30. Free to all as part of Piccolo Spoleto 2021, guests are welcome to come hang out and enjoy some relaxing afternoon musical fare.

May 30, noon. Wragg Square, 342 Meeting St. Downtown.



Day by Day

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

Tuesday, June 8

SUNDOWN POETRY

David B. Axelrod

Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art

135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

Dr. David B. Axelrod served as poet laureate of Volusia County, Florida, from 2015-2023 and has been published in hundreds of magazines and anthologies, along with 22 books of poetry, including his newest, *All Vows: New & Selected Poems*. Axelrod has delivered hundreds of performances worldwide solo and with notable poets. He is a three-time Fulbright poet, and was the first Fulbright poet-in-residence in the People's Republic of China.

Wednesday, June 9

SUNDOWN POETRY

Kwoya Fagin Maples

Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art

135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6 p.m.

Kwoya Fagin Maples is a writer from Charleston. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Alabama and is a Cave Canem fellow and current Alabama State Council on the Arts Literary fellow. She is the author of *Mend*, a 2019 finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry and for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' Donald Hall Prize for Poetry.

Thursday, June 10

SUNDOWN POETRY

Grace C. Ocasio

Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art

135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, Grace C. Ocasio's latest collection, *Family Reunion* (Broadstone Books), was released in March. She was a finalist for the 2016

Aesthetica Creative Writing Award in Poetry and was a recipient of a 2014 North Carolina Arts Council Regional Artist Project grant.

Friday, June 11

SUNDOWN POETRY

Ren Ruggiero

Lenhardt Garden at The Gibbes Museum of Art

135 Meeting St. Downtown.
6:30 p.m.

Ren Ruggiero received a B.A. in writing from New College of California. She lives in Charleston with her wife, two cats, and Chihuahua. *Mermaid Daughter* is her first chapbook. Her work has appeared in *Kakalak 2017*, *Morbid Curiosity*, and *Arcana: The Tarot Poetry Anthology*.

Bluegrass Stroll

Hampton Park

30 Mary Murray Blvd. Downtown.
6 p.m.

Ramble among several performance settings presenting our finest homegrown pickers and fiddlers, produced in partnership with Awendaw Green.

Saturday, June 12

World Music

Colonial Lake

46-54 Ashley Ave. Downtown.
4 p.m.

An afternoon of cultural exploration by way of Peter Kfoury's World Music Café and other local talents.

Charleston Reprise

Hampton Park

30 Mary Murray Blvd. Downtown.
6 p.m.

Piccolo Spoleto will invite the artists ... You bring the fun! Close out the Festival with a high energy series of performances to celebrate everything we love about the place we call home.



Visit Charleston's Afro-American Historical Sites

The Underground Railroad
The Battery • Slave Graveyard
Jones Hotel • Black Slave Owners
Brown Fellowship Society
The Market Place • Sweetgrass Baskets
Old Slave Mart • Porgy & Bess

**Tours leave from
43 John St.**

**Monday - Friday
11 a.m. and 1 p.m.**

**Saturday
11 a.m., 1 p.m.
and 3 p.m.**



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Q&A

Theatre 99's Greg Tavares

on laughing through the pandemic

By Kevin Wilson

Theatre 99 has faced a lot of challenges since its founding in 2000, but the comedians behind that enterprise were as surprised as anyone else by how quickly a spreading virus could disrupt what had been a thriving performing arts scene.

Piccolo Spoleto mainstays from way back, you won't find the LOL-funny Theatre 99 crew on this year's all-outdoor festival. Nonetheless, we know we'll be back in those T99 seats soon, so we recently caught up with co-founder Greg Tavares to discuss the art of improv, his long, laugh-fueled journey and the recent shifts that were necessary for the survival of the comedy shop.

City Paper: How did your background and education prepare you for improv?

Greg Tavares: I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting from the University of South Carolina and a Master of Fine Arts in directing from the University of Nebraska. I did my first improv show when

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Photos by Rûta Smith

Theatre 99 has grown into a company of actors that perform year-round on stage

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Theatre 99

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I was 15 years old and never stopped. I have performed all over the country and taught at improv festivals all over. I even wrote a book called, *Improv for Everyone*.

CP: Who or what were some of your early influences?

GT: I still watch YouTube videos of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

CP: Has being based in Charleston informed your approach to creating comedy at all?

GT: I love the performing-arts scene here and I would love to see even more collaboration among groups. I think our style of improv comedy is unique. When other improv groups come here they talk about a Charleston style of improv. It makes sense to me because Charleston has such a distinctive style, why wouldn't our improv have one as well?

CP: Tell us how Theatre 99 came together and who your collaborators are in this endeavor?

GT: Brandy Sullivan, Timmy Finch and I were in an improv group called The Have Nots! We used to tour all over doing our show but we thought it would be great to have a local venue. We rented an old coal warehouse on Cumberland Street, which served as our first version of Theatre 99. When we opened, people started coming out of the woodwork who wanted to try improv. Over the years we have met and worked with tons of super-funny local actors. Now we have a company of actors that perform year-round on stage at Theatre 99 [now located at 280 Meeting St.].

CP: How would you describe your overall aesthetic?

GT: Big characters doing funny things and, every once in a while, grounded realistic scenes to prove we are still actors.

CP: Is there a particular aspect of your work that you are especially proud of?

GT: I am very proud of being the educational director of Theatre 99. Teaching adults to remember how to play is very important to me. Play is important for mental health.

CP: It's been a lot harder to play during the pandemic. What sort of changes did the COVID-19 outbreak bring about?

GT: It has ruined the performing arts sector and Theatre 99 has lost so much money. We are still in survival mode [actively seeking donations for the first time] and will be for another year. Lots of improv groups did "Zoomprov," but we did not. We



Photos courtesy Theatre 99

Theatre 99's founders Brandy Sullivan (above, left), Greg Tavares (above, middle) and Timmy Finch back in the day

waited until we felt comfortable doing our show on stage and we just streamed it. It was just like we would have done if we had an audience, we just had an empty theater. I also recorded an audiobook of my solo show during COVID called, *I am the Horrible Thing*. It's about the time when I almost died in the ocean while on vacation.

CP: What is your plan for moving forward?

GT: We are finally back to doing live shows again three days a week, every week. "Improv Strikes Back" is kind of a placeholder name for our we-are-still-here-and-still-kicking show. It is the same format that we have gotten known for in town. The first act is short-form games where the audience gets to decide most of the details that we use in the scenes. In the second act, we cut loose and do long-form improv based on an audience suggestion. We go for about an hour in the first act and about 30 minutes in the second act. Because we have a smaller capacity [approximately 45 people], shows tend to sell out. We also have adult classes and kids' classes, plus we are teaching corporate workshops and we are doing private shows. We are so open for business you can't believe it. Tell the world Theatre 99 is open!

Note: Theatre 99 is not on the Piccolo Spoleto schedule as of publication, but stay tuned to the Charleston City Paper for news on performances during this year's festival.

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Owner Jonzetta Taylor holds a photo of her grandfather.

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Through the years

Edna's LowCountry got started when Jonzetta's grandfather, Walter Wright Sr., sold fruits and vegetables with his mother and two brothers. Then her mother took over the business with her four children.

“We are a family-owned and operated business specializing in hand-mixed spices, rice and bean mixtures, hot sauces, cookbooks and other food products

specific to the Charleston area,” she said. “Our mission is to give our customers a ‘Taste of Charleston’ by providing delicious, travel-friendly food products while inspiring other entrepreneurs starting out to never give up.”

Looking ahead

“In the future, we plan to have Edna's grandchildren take over the business and continue building upon our family legacy,” Jonzetta said.

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