

PORTSMOUTH

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OPENING HEARTS AND MINDS



ARTICLE BY ANN KATHRYN KELLY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA GAGNON



Ben Hart and
Brandon James

THE SEACOAST REPERTORY THEATRE EXPLORES THE
ANCIENT ART OF STORYTELLING IN NEW, INVENTIVE
WAYS TO ELICIT REFLECTION AND EMPATHY

As one of history's oldest art forms, theater examines the human condition through the power of storytelling to touch hearts and broaden views. Our community's theatrical hub—The Seacoast Repertory Theatre on Bow Street in Portsmouth—has been doing just that, entertaining and inspiring audiences since 1988.

The nonprofit offers live, top-tier performances year-round through programming that includes: Main Stage productions; The Red Light Series, which showcases alternative/experimental entertainment; The Sol Series, which amplifies diverse voices; and Senior Repertory Theatre, which invites locals 55 and over to embrace their inner artist—culminating in a year-end, seniors-only stage performance. “The Rep” also offers classes for youths, teens, adults, and moms and tots.

Ben Hart and Brandon James share a special connection to The Rep, where both grew up participating in youth theater productions. Decades later, they continue writing, designing, performing, and producing together—in official and unofficial capacities.

Unofficially, they're referred to around town as The Mad Men of OopsyDaisy, Inc. One of their original shows—*MadHaus*—is a long-running fan favorite in The Red Light Series. Officially, Ben and Brandon returned to their Rep roots in 2015 when they directed *Avenue Q*, featuring puppets they made from recycled material.

The duo was asked to lead The Red Light Series as co-curators, and by 2019, they were named Associate Artistic Co-directors. When the pandemic shut down in-person gatherings in March 2020, Ben and Brandon pivoted overnight—literally—to reimagine The Rep's mission of live audience entertainment.

“A small group, maybe 10 of us, immediately huddled and figured out how to keep our programming alive, despite the restrictions,” Brandon remembers. “Within two days of the nationwide

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lockdown, we had a live-streaming studio up and running inside the theater, bringing the community 24-hour radio, cabaret programming, meditation classes, and more.”

Their commitment to serve the community with uninterrupted entertainment through this upheaval was a testament to their creative leadership, and Ben and Brandon were promoted to Executive Artistic Co-directors. By July 2020, The Rep opened to live audiences once more, initially in small waves.

“I think we had six people that first week in July,” Ben recalls. “Socially distanced seating, of course, and air filtration. Then, it jumped to nine in the audience and slowly built from there.” The Rep, at that time, was the only theater in the nation open to audiences, earning them coverage in *The New York Times* and overseas.

Ben and Brandon hire a team of artists from around the world to help them each season: directors, choreographers, actors, builders, technicians, and costume designers from Broadway. They make a habit of embracing innovation and creativity, reimagining stories through original set design and costumes. “Everything is made from scratch,” Brandon says. “We give every artist the platform to create and flourish.”

They infuse The Rep’s programming with a fresh approach that flips the script to explore storytelling through new and exciting lenses. In a recent production of *Peter Pan*, Captain Hook and all the pirates were played by women. Another time, they cast a woman as Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha* and gave the role of Sancho to a deaf actor who signed his lines and lyrics while a “shadow Sancho” spoke and sang in parallel. In this year’s production of *The Children of Eden*, the script’s opening lines—“Before time and space began”—sparked their decision to reimagine this Biblical story in a futuristic, all-white science lab set.

Currently, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* is on stage at The Rep’s Bow Street playhouse through the middle of July, with five additional productions scheduled through the end of 2024. Ben and Brandon are now finalizing selections for the 2025 season, with an announcement planned for late August to reveal the overarching theme and 10 new Main Stage shows. They also recently opened a second, smaller stage on Lafayette Road in Portsmouth—The Rep Studios—featuring lesser-known titles, some penned by local playwrights.

In our world of technology and social media, viewed through phones and laptop screens, live theater encourages people to set aside schedules, worries, and responsibilities and simply experience the world of storytelling, together.

“Theater is irreplaceable,” says Ben. “It’s an ancient tradition and a truly communal experience that enters your body. Theater has the power to change lives in a way that no other art form can.”

Brandon adds: “Theater enables us to flex our muscles of empathy. It’s a practice in reflection, making us more loving, open, and evolved.”

Learn more: seacoastrep.org



Peter Pan



Children of Eden



Man of La Mancha