

Bankside Repertory Theatre coming to Jacoby Arts Center.

August 4 2017 2:42 PM

ALTON — The Bankside Repertory Theatre is promising a satisfying full-course meal of drama, comedy and ideas to be presented in more accommodating seating in its upcoming season at the Jacoby Arts Center.



The professional acting ensemble will present “Eurydice,” a new take on the classic Greek myth “Orpheus,” September 14-23; “The Devil’s Passion,” a retelling of the story of Jesus through Satan’s eyes, December 8-16; “Falling,” a family drama centered around an autistic teenager, April 19-28; and “The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged),” a comedy mash-up of the Bard’s plays, June 21-30.

“There’s a mix of something for everybody,” said John O’Hagan, of the ensemble. “I think it’s a very strong season because of the scale of the stories that are being told. At the core of them is something on what it means to be human, how we continue to rise above really difficult circumstances and keep our heads up.”

“Our mission statement is to provide themes that are thought-provoking,” said Caleb King, of the acting ensemble that is launching its third season as artists in residence at the Jacoby. “So overall, especially if you came to see all four, you would feel very satisfied having been given a nice meal, so to speak, of things to think about.”

This season, through some creative use of the Jacoby’s huge space and the addition of seat risers, theatergoers can expect views unobstructed by the gallery’s columns while retaining the immediacy – a feeling of almost being part of the production – the Bankside offers.

“I don’t think the columns are going to be an issue at all this year,” O’Hagan said. “Not only in terms of the story and story-telling, the experience the audience is going to have in this third year is going to be fundamentally different.”

“Eurydice” retells the myth of Orpheus from the perspective of his wife, Eurydice. While it is a tale of love and regret, King, who is directing the play, said it also has humor and poetry.

“I would love people to walk out with a sense of the beauty of that play and feeling very satisfied with the variety of moments it presents, because there’s some really funny stuff, some really touching stuff and some heart-breaking things,” King said.

Sarah Ruhl, who wrote the play, has said in interviews that her work is about re-engaging the audience’s imagination. “There is so much going on in life that can pull our attention away,” O’Hagan said. “One of the things that Sarah Ruhl is committed to exploring is how you can just sit in this moment, experience this moment.”

“The Devil’s Passion” was added to the line-up after O’Hagan’s mother-in-law, who lives in London, saw the production there. After hearing her raves, he jumped on the play, and the Bankside will present its U.S. premier at the Jacoby.

“The Devil’s Passion, or Easter in Hell: a Divine Comedy” has a religious theme, without being dogmatic, O’Hagan said. The one-man one-act play by Justin Butcher retells the Easter story from the perspective of the Devil, who exudes modern notions of political and moral sleaze.

“Falling,” about the complicated lives of family members struggling to love and support a severely autistic teenager, was written by Deanna Jent, artistic director of Mustard Seed Theatre in St. Louis and a theater professor at Fontbonne University. Jent has agreed to direct the Alton production of her play that has been performed around the world.

“The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged)” conflates the 37 comedies, tragedies and histories into a comic whirlwind.

“I think it’s as much fun for the actors as it is for the audience,” O’Hagan said. “It’s exhausting in the right way. We come off the stage and say ‘We actually did it!’ It’s a ride the actors and the audience take together. As we’re heading into the fun part of the year it’s a great way to kick off the summer.”

Each of the plays presents staging challenges, but O’Hagan said part of the theatrical experience for the audience is filling in the set with their own ideas.

“One of the things I love about all of these four shows is that they do things that celebrate the art of the theater. None of these plays is theater trying to imitate cinema,” he said. “So much of the challenge in stage direction is how do we give just enough in the scene design, in the directing, in the performance that encourages the audience to take that step to engage their imagination and complete the picture for themselves.”

Producing plays in a 100-plus years-old former furniture store presents challenges, but O’Hagan said that “forces us to dig deeper, work harder to get our stories out, at times over the traffic noises or the fan noises. Now in our third year, we continue to find little improvements, little things year after year that make the experience better and better.”

The Bankside is “getting increased buzz from across the river” in St. Louis, which could enrich theater on both sides, O’Hagan said.

“Actors, artists are interested in coming this way across the river to work with us, as are critics, which we’re excited about. We’re beginning to establish positive relationships with some of the companies in St. Louis, and I think over time we’ll see a rising tide lifting all boats situation.”

The five core members of the ensemble bring a level of professional acting experience in big cities – New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston- seldom seen in smaller communities.

“We’ve all come to Alton for a lot of different reasons,” said O’Hagan, who is an associate professor of theater at Principia College. “I think one of the things that is unique about Bankside Repertory Theatre is it is a group of artists who have committed their lives, not their livelihoods but their lives, to finding and sharing stories that mean something to us and therefore we hope will mean something to the community.”