

Where drive-in meets live theater

Alden Theatre in McLean wanted to go beyond online shows

BY THOMAS FLOYD

For most of the theater world, the coronavirus pandemic has brought live productions to a screeching halt. But in the age of Zoom readings and live-streamed stagings, leadership at the McLean Community Center's Alden Theatre pondered a question: What if that stop sign for in-person performance could be reconfigured as a detour?

"I had this burning feeling that there just had to be another way to make art that wasn't over Zoom, or some kind of other virtual, in-front-of-a-screen-type technology," says Danielle Van Hook, the Alden's director of youth theater programs.

That feeling steered Van Hook toward "Drive-Thru Drama," which the Alden will debut this weekend with the new play "Small Change." From the safety of their cars, audience members will navigate 10 stations spread across the community center's parking lot, each of which features an actor performing a two-minute monologue for their role in the narrative.

Van Hook imagined the idea as a spin on medieval pageant plays, in which movable stages were wheeled from town to town, cast members in tow. But in this version, the theatergoers are the ones on the move. Sarah Schallern Treff, Van Hook's fellow producer on the project, likens the experience to Walt Disney World rides — think Pirates of the Caribbean or the Haunted Mansion — which have parkgoers roll past a slew of animatronic performers.

Van Hook floated the idea to Treff and writer-director Andrew Scott Zimmer in early May. To Zimmer, the undertaking proved particularly daunting: In addition to the typical storytelling demands of helming a play, he had to help coordinate the parking lot configuration and traffic patterns. Zimmer also took on the responsibility of swiftly penning a new play, crafted to accommodate socially distanced performers. And he cast the roles without seeing the actors in person, after the Alden put out a call on Instagram for video auditions from performers 14 and older, with actors from the McLean community given priority.

"The thing that excites me and



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: "Small Change" writer and director Andrew Scott Zimmer is seen in the parking lot of the McLean Community Center, where the Alden Theatre will perform his new play to audience members in cars. The audience will drive between 10 stations. Actors Leland Hao and Julia Messing rehearse their monologues ahead of Friday's opening.

kind of terrifies me a little bit is when pieces start getting removed," Zimmer says, "and you kind of have to MacGyver up a production out of a series of challenges."

Inspired by such vignette-structured movies as 1993's "Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould" and 1998's "The Red Violin," Zimmer took just one weekend to write a first draft of "Small Change." The play opens with a student writing the words "Make a small change" on a dollar bill, then tracks that bill's path in and out of various characters' lives, threading their stories into one overarching tapestry.

"In the script, there's a connec-

tion between people that don't even have to meet each other, that don't even know that the others exist," Treff says. "They are connected by this dollar bill and the small changes they make. I think it's important to remind our community — the arts community and hopefully a broader community — that we are all connected. We can do small things in our lives that impact others, even if we don't see it."

For each of night of the production, audience members can sign up to enter during 15-minute intervals, beginning at 6 p.m. and ending at 8 p.m., with up to four cars allowed per interval. Although each actor will perform



PHOTOS BY SARAH SCHALLERN TREF/ALDEN THEATRE

If you go

DRIVE-THRU DRAMA: SMALL CHANGE

McLean Community Center, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. 703-790-0123. mcleancenter.org/performing-arts.

Dates: Friday-Sunday, and July 10-12.

Prices: \$5 per carload for McLean residents; otherwise \$10.

his or her monologue as many as 32 times per night, the show also features three "flex" actors, who will understudy several roles and step in if performers need relief from the summer heat.

With coronavirus concerns in mind, actors will wear transparent face shields and not share any props. Audience members will be asked to stay in their vehicles and are encouraged to wear masks. The actors will be positioned at

least six feet away from the vehicles. The Alden is also implementing a noncontact box office: Audience members must buy tickets online and provide a license plate number, which will be recorded for entry to the show.

If the performances — six total, spread over this weekend and next — run without major speed bumps, Van Hook and her collaborators hope this will be only the beginning for "Drive-Thru Drama." Although a successful run would bode well for future shows amid the health crisis, the Alden also sees potential in the premise beyond the restraints of a pandemic.

"I hope other theater-makers see what we're doing and want to put their spin on it," Van Hook says. "I hope this isn't something that lives just with us. And I hope that we're producing more of these, with a pandemic or without."

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