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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Rock River Players one-act festival honors Ely’s memory

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3 TEXT BODY:

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4 For the fifth year running, the Rock River Players (RRP)  
5 evening of one-act plays is back, with a big following, and with  
6 original works, usually by area playwrights, and, each year, with  
7 newcomers to the RRP.

8 This year marks another stride with the renaming of the  
9 festival as The Annual Tom Ely Festival of One-Acts to honor the  
10 memory of Tom Ely, a core company member who died in 2025.

11 Ely, distinguished for building camaraderie in a company,  
12 for anticipating and addressing cast needs, and for modeling both  
13 professionalism and community spirit in all he did, shared the  
14 belief that participating in theater is about much more than being  
15 on stage.

16 The annual festival will now celebrate Ely's lasting legacy  
17 of inclusion and the spirit of exploration he brought to every  
18 production, says RRP Artistic Director Amy Donahue.

19 According to a RRP media release, the 2026 one-act  
20 lineup "offers moments of laughter and reflection, exploring  
21 universal themes of family, memory, technology, connection, and  
22 grief," through three "distinct lenses."

23 Featured in this year's 90-minute program will be *The*  
24 *Mockingbird's Nest*, by Craig Bailey. Directed by Shey Nessralla,  
25 it's "a futuristic satire examining the intersection of technology,  
26 human connection, and the lengths we're willing to go to  
27 alleviate our guilt."

28 *Work and Play*, written and directed by Jon DeAngelis,  
29 "provides a riotous collision between the past and present,  
30 bringing the audience into one family's 1940s living room, until  
31 their quintessential domestic life is interrupted by the distractions  
32 of modern life."

33 Finally, *Advocate for the Dead*, by Miles Ledoux and  
34 directed by Kay Beckett, "brings an original Agatha Christie  
35 adaptation to the stage with an atmospheric drama set against the  
36 cliffs of Mallorca, exploring themes of mortality and the paths we  
37 leave behind."

38 Originally on the program, *The Bench*, by John Swartz,  
39 will be postponed due to health issues. It would have been  
40 directed by Charlene Kennedy.

## 41 **The creative process**

42 *The Commons* had a chance to talk with a few company  
43 members recently.

44 DeAngelis, a drama therapist with a master's in the field  
45 from New York University, has owned property in Guilford for 10  
46 years, to which he and his husband moved to live full time last  
47 summer.

48 One of the three hosts of the *Drama Therapy Radio*  
49 podcast and founder of a new practice, Vermont Nature Therapy,  
50 DeAngelis has a background in performance, directing,  
51 playwriting, and producing.

52 His play, one of the first he wrote, was first produced by  
53 New Jersey's Chatham Players: "It's really experimental. I don't  
54 want to give anything away, but I guess the question I'd ask is:  
55 'How would a family in the 1940s react to today's theater  
56 culture?'

57 "Yeah, let's leave it at that," he says, smiling wryly.

58 Of working with the RRP, DeAngelis says, "Amy  
59 [Donahue]'s been incredible. The cast is great. The auditions were  
60 very fun."

61 He says it was "reassuring to see everyone knew each  
62 other." As a "newbie," he says, "they were all very welcoming to  
63 me."

64 Actress Dyana Lee, who plays a "desperate widow" in  
65 *Advocate for the Dead*, reflected on her life in the theater, which  
66 began with professional aspirations and training in a couple of  
67 highly-regarded programs, such as New York's HB Studio.

68 Lee pivoted, though, in the Reagan era, when "funding  
69 for the arts had been dramatically cut, just when I was starting  
70 out as a young theater professional. I was finding it very difficult  
71 to make a living." She turned to law and honed a career primarily  
72 in government positions.

73 When still working full time in New York City, she says,  
74 "I bought my house in Guilford, and I just changed my life." Then  
75 roughly two years ago, "I found myself in a position where I  
76 could actually relocate full time. I got here. It was November, and  
77 it was cold. And I thought, "Gee, how am I going to make a new  
78 community for myself?"

79 She first started going to St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
80 and then became involved with Guilford Center Stage. Soon, she  
81 found herself with the RRP and has since been in its full-length  
82 and one-act plays.

83 "The most important work that I've done at Rock River  
84 was [playing Fanny Steimer] in *The Freeing of Molly Steimer*, in  
85 2025, a production that she describes as "a really amazing piece  
86 of theater."

87 "So that was it. My second life as an actress was  
88 launched," she says, happy to be "now I'm back to my real love."

89 "Frankly, this time around, it's even better because of the  
90 theater community here, the community you find when you're  
91 putting together a piece of theater and you're working with  
92 people at all levels," Lee says. "It's amazing."

93 Shey Nessralla had never done theater until three years  
94 ago, when his entrance was in set building, stage management,  
95 and design with the RRP. He's since been in two one-act festivals  
96 and two full-length RRP productions, including last summer's *The*  
97 *Freeing of Mollie Steimer*, where he played The Bug.

98 Still "doing all the behind-the-scenes stuff," Nessralla  
99 tries his hand at directing for the first time with this production.

100 "I'm really enjoying this process," he says, noting that  
101 with his work experience he finds it easy to lead a team  
102 collaboratively.

103 "And I'd say, I understand more about acting now that  
104 I'm directing," Nessralla continues. "It's been an interesting  
105 journey seeing what my actors need for remembering lines or  
106 blocking — being really open in communication with them and  
107 then saying the things that were helpful for me as an actor and  
108 learning things from them that they need. I'm working with two  
109 very experienced actors, so I'm learning so much from them."

110 Acknowledging that "the overall vision I had was  
111 something that was subject to change," Nessralla says that once  
112 he started collaborating with the actors and "the energy they give  
113 their characters, the vision did change. And it keeps changing

114 and it keeps evolving into the piece that all three of us want it to  
115 be.”

116 Nessrella adds candidly that he’s “still so in the  
117 beginning of theater that these things still make me emotional.”

118 “I just cried at the last rehearsal because [technical  
119 director] Jess Guerrero came and I got to see it under the lights:  
120 the [cast members] didn’t need a line; they didn’t need anything;  
121 they just went. And I got emotional halfway through because I  
122 didn’t expect it.”

123 RRP Artistic Director Amy Donahue is also producer of  
124 the one-act festival in which she also acts. How does she juggle?

125 “I don’t do it alone!” she says. “I feel fortunate to have  
126 such wonderful collaborators in the RRP community. The magic  
127 happens because everyone involved is just as invested in the  
128 outcome as I am. We’re all here because of how much we love  
129 the work, and that makes the heavy lifting feel much lighter.

130 “I’m always blown away by the talent that emerges from  
131 all around us each year — from the worlds built by each of the  
132 local playwrights, to new and seasoned actors exploring their  
133 narratives together, and directors bringing each story to life  
134 through their unique perspectives,” Donahue says.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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135 Performances are at the Williamsville Hall, 35 Dover Rd,  
136 Williamsville, Thursday through Saturday, May 21-23, at 7 p.m.,  
137 and Sunday, May 24 at 3 p.m. In the spirit of making the arts  
138 accessible to all, RRP, with this production, launches a sliding-  
139 scale ticket price range of \$15 to \$25 for general admission, with  
140 no one turned away for lack of funds. Tickets are available both in  
141 advance at [rockriverplayers.org](http://rockriverplayers.org), or at the door (with cash, check,  
142 card, or Venmo/PayPal). For more information, contact  
143 [info@rockriverplayers.org](mailto:info@rockriverplayers.org).

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