

Festival UnBound: Bringing Bethlehem together through the arts

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Anne Hills, performs "Everything Matters" as part of Touchstone Theatre's Festival UnBound event announcement in February. With debut of Festival UnBound, Touchstone looking to help the city carve a path to the future through a multi-arts community initiative which will run Oct. 4 to Oct. 13 at numerous sites around Bethlehem. (MONICA CABRERA / THE MORNING CALL)

For more than a hundred years, Bethlehem was Steel. But in 1998, the steady decline of Bethlehem Steel neared its conclusion as steel-making operations ceased. A year later, Bethlehem's Touchstone Theatre paid tribute to the city's

steel-making heritage with an ambitious, 10-day arts and culture celebration called Steel Festival: The Art of an Industry.

Now, two decades later, Touchstone is set to host another elaborate arts and culture community initiative, Festival UnBound, which will run Oct. 4-13 at numerous sites in Bethlehem.

The goal: To explore the city's identity since Steel closed and bring the city's diverse groups together through the arts. "Where are and where do we want to go?" said J.P. Jordan, Touchstone's artistic director. "That's one of the most important ideas. And the art is the manifestation of that thinking."

The festival was organized in collaboration with the city of Bethlehem, local African American and Latino communities, educational institutions such as the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts and Moravian College, former area steelworkers and other community groups.



Bill George performs as Prometheus in a 1999 production of Touchstone Theatre's 'Steelbound,' a modern-day adaptation of a Greek myth in which a former steel worker laments his fate while chained on top of a steel ladle. (Morning Call file photo/TMC)

Planning for the festival began three years ago with the idea of marking that 20th anniversary of Steel Festival: The Art of an Industry.

Organizers knew that it was important to include community groups from various demographics in the city. They started meeting with a wide range of people, including former steelworkers, health care providers, homeless shelter leaders, mental health providers and others. The talks were often informal, sometimes around a table, sharing a meal.

“We would ask the same question over and over,” said Bill George, the festival’s director and Touchstone’s co-founder. “What kind of community do you really want?’ They recorded hundreds of conversations and, from those, began to shape the structure of the festival, including writing original theater. “It’s easy to say, ‘I’m going to be inclusive,’ but they are actually doing it,” said Bethlehem City Councilwoman Olga Negrón said. “They really reached out to every corner. Just making this all happen and making it inclusive for real is a big accomplishment.”

Negrón is involved in the festival’s cornerstone production, “Prometheus/Redux,” helping with costumes and set materials. Few know that Negrón is a trained costume designer and worked for years in professional theater. “It’s such a big masterpiece, and it’s super exciting,” Negrón said. “The first time I read the script of ‘Prometheus’ I thought ‘Wow, this is good.’” “Prometheus/Redux” takes place in a hospital — a nod to the city’s newly dominant industry, health care. Written by Gerard Stropnický,

“Prometheus/Redux” explores how the city defines itself in the face of an ever-changing, ever more interconnected world and no longer bound to steel. The production will also feature music adapted from the centerpiece of the first festival in 1999 “Steelbound,” which was written by Ysaye Barnwell of the Grammy Award-winning a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. George, who appeared in “Steelbound,” returns in “Prometheus/Redux.”

Festival UnBound will feature eight other original theater events, all of which center around the idea of weaving together the city's diverse groups. Stories of multiculturalism and women's rights as they relate to the city's birth are the heart of "Hidden Seed: Bethlehem's Forgotten Utopia," written by George and Lehigh University's Seth Moglen. Another original production, "The Secret," is a play by Mock Turtle Marionette Theater on the celebrated feminist writer and LGBT icon, Hilda Doolittle.

Theater is just one piece of the festival. "A Joyful Noise" will be a musical collaboration of Bethlehem's Bach Choir, with other groups including Nazareth Area High School Choir, Camille Armstrong, Greater Shiloh Church Choir, Big Easy Easton Brass, Ysaye Barnwell, Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts Touring Choir, Bel Canto Youth Chorus, and Jakopa's Punch.

"For me, that's going to be a special event," Jordan said. "There's no quicker way to make a friend or bridge a gap than to pick up a guitar and jam with them."

Bethlehem's diverse groups are also a crucial part of the festival. An example: "Homecoming," which is an event that will highlight the African American community in the Valley, will feature an afternoon of spoken word poets, live music, African drumming, a showcase of ethnic food and vendors, and speakers on health and equity issues. "Forward March: The Future of Our Warriors" spotlights the contributions made by the Valley's veterans, particularly female vets. "Embracing Bethlehem/Abrazos a Belén" features New York's preeminent Latino theater collective Pregones Theater in a program developed in partnership with Bethlehem's Latino community. Youth are also a big focus. There will be a panel discussion on sustainability featuring city high school students, for example.

“If we are only thinking of today, tomorrow and next year, we aren’t really laying the chart out for a sustainable future,” said Paul Pierpoint, the festival’s panel and forum organizer. “We want to assure the people who live here that we have the resources for the future. Sustainability is really crucial to the whole festival.”

Students from the city’s five high schools were invited to write about what they think the city can do to improve sustainability. The students were invited to participate in the forum and discuss the topics in their pieces with city and community officials.

“The main hope is that they understand that they have an opportunity to talk to the decision-makers,” Pierpoint said. “It’s an opportunity to feel somewhat empowered to express themselves.”

One of those decision-makers scheduled to be there is City Councilman J. William Reynolds. “We all live in Bethlehem, and we all understand what Bethlehem Steel means,” Reynolds said at a recent council meeting. “And I think all of us, when we look across the country and we see the kind of decline of community identities, whether or not it’s religion or a huge industry like Bethlehem Steel, there is just a wide, wide possibility there. How do we form a new identity? And this is obviously done through art, through theater and conversation. But it’s also about the issues that we see all the time: Why do people disagree, how does that have to do with identity and how do you find ways to disagree with somebody?”

Reynolds credited Touchstone Theatre with taking on the issues and having those difficult conversations. “I don’t think that a lot of people really have the guts to have those conversations. But Touchstone and all of the partners here,

that's what they're trying to do, and we all owe it to, not just to Touchstone, but all the partners here to get over there as much as possible and to show respect and to be a part of this conversation about, like I said, not just who we were, but who we can be and how do we get there together."

Negron will also be part of several panel discussions on issues such as race and gender equality.

The festival will wind down with a free community meal on its final day, featuring the flavors of Bethlehem, at the Charles A. Brown Ice House. Festival UnBound organizers plan to take stock afterward, looking at how they can take what happened and what was said at the festival and move it forward. "The idea of 'unbound' is that the process and the festival are always generating their own raw material," Jordan said. "Through this, we can dig deeper and take it a step further, looking at 'Can we move it forward?'"

But one big goal of the festival — finding that sense of community — has already been achieved. "People focus so much on the end result of these things," Jordan said. "And that's important but, and there are so many cliché quotes on this, the journey is the thing. The impact of building the art itself puts people in direct connect with the idea of community."

Info: festivalunbound.com

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