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East End Special Players Return With a New Show... and This One Is About Turtles!



5 Photos

Elizabeth Vespe on Apr 16, 2023

“It’s raining turtles!” No, not really. That’s the abstract of the East End Special Players newest theatrical performance coming to Sag Harbor. The Players will appear in a premiere benefit performance at Bay Street Theater on Saturday, April 29, at 4 p.m. after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19, with their newest show, “Turtles on the Tarmac.”

The East End Special Players is a theater company celebrating differently abled actors. The troupe includes people with learning disabilities, autism, Down Syndrome and other cognitive or physical challenges.

In the upcoming performance, Collier Lee of North Haven will star as the lead pilot aboard the plane.

“I’m the head captain of the plane,” Lee explained after rehearsing his scene on a recent Saturday at the First Presbyterian Church on Main Street in Southampton. “This is my first year doing this. It’s fun. I’m excited for the show, but a little nervous.”

Lee and his on-stage co-pilot, Robert Carroll III, were immersed in their roles for the rehearsal and decked out in pilot uniforms, including hats, badges and epaulets. Pilot number two, Carroll, has been involved with the East End Special Players for a few years now.

The show starts off with Lee and Carroll in the cockpit steering the aircraft in a beautifully designed plane prop. Imagine an airport, a storm, canceled flights, characters with names

like Rotten Robin and Tammy Tam-Tam, stolen goods, spies, fast-paced slapstick, and a colorful kaleidoscope of mayhem and music. And yes, turtles!

“Turtles on the Tarmac” was created out of the eccentric and lighthearted imaginations of the seasoned actors who make up the East End Special Players. The show is a family-friendly romp filled with music, intrigue and an impromptu talent show.

This often-hidden world of talent has been performing on the East End for more than 30 years, staging everything from classical plays like Rostand’s “Cyrano de Bergerac” and Moliere’s “The Scams of Scapin” to “The Fish Juggler,” a tableau vivant built around the imaginative work of East End artist Gabriele Raacke.

“I am so happy working with the players. They really crack me up. They inspire me with their wittiness and bluntness,” said Jacqui Leader, the East End Special Players’ artistic director who has been at the helm of the company for more than 25 years. She’s gotten to know her actors well in that time, and added that it can be difficult at times with so many personalities in the room, but Leader always reinforces being positive and having high self-esteem.

“I love theater with the Players,” Leader said, adding that she attended acting school in New York City and studied privately for many years. Leader lived in England with her husband and two children before moving to Amagansett in 1991. That’s when she got back into theater, and started a kids theater company called Kids Connect. During this time, she was also acting and auditioning.

“One day a director friend asked if I would be interested in working with a group of people in theater with different disabilities. I kept saying ‘no,’ because I felt I wasn’t trained in that field. Well, push came to shove, and I went to visit the East End Special Players one Saturday. My heart went boom! I started working with them the next Saturday,” added Leader who had only lived on the East End for about a year since leaving England before joining the East End Special Players. “So many Saturdays later and gearing up for another performance.”

In 2006, Leader encouraged the Players to depart from traditional scripted theater and challenged the actors to develop their own performance material, in their own words, based on their own lives. What she discovered was a deep well of common emotions and life expectations. She also found an abundance of high-spirited good humor.

“Turtles on the Tarmac” follows in this tradition from the company’s past hit plays “Whimsy World” (2019) and “Trouble in Jamaica” (2017), both of which were staged at Bay Street Theater. The players have been developing this current play for two years, despite COVID-19 interference, the need to rehearse online weekly, fine-tuning their humor and unique vision to bring a full production designed for all ages.

Elizabeth “Betsy” Weinberger has been a part of East End Special Players for about 20 years. Weinberger is cast as a waitress in the airport lounge for “Turtles on the Tarmac.”

“I think this one is my favorite plays I’ve done,” said Weinberger. “I love acting. I love being in front of people.”

Bill Wilson of Hampton Bays has been involved in the company for a long time. He said, "I love acting and I've been in a lot of plays."

Julian Garcia is playing a Transportation Security Administration agent at the airport for this production. He has been involved with the East End Special Players for three years now.

"I like being a part of it," said Garcia. "My friend Jacqui runs it and she's a lot of fun."

Phoebe Rogers of Water Mill is playing a bride in the performance.

"I like acting. I like this play," said Rogers who added that she has made a lot of friends through the program and looks forward to rehearsal on Saturdays.

Loreen Enright of Southampton, a vocal and piano teacher and composer, performs all the music for the play. This is her third year composing the musical arrangement and aiding the cast with vocals and piano.

"It's very gratifying and humbling. It's wonderful to work with everyone. They have challenges that we probably wouldn't understand," Enright explained during rehearsal between music breaks. "To be a part of this and to help with music, which is what I love, is truly a gift."

“They’re very funny,” she added. “You will be laughing. The play is comical. Jacqui is amazing. She listens to everyone. She doesn’t shut down anyone’s idea. She gives everyone a sense of value.”

In 2019, Bay Street Theater became the official home of the East End Special Players, formally acknowledging the group as company-in-residence. Tracy Mitchell, Bay Street’s executive director, and Scott Schwartz, the theater’s artistic director, said in a release that they believe the Players, like other actors, writers and talented performers, should be able to participate in Bay Street’s offerings; to continue to develop their own new artistic works; and to begin to grow their access to fully abled professionals working in the world of theater

“I’m very giddy about this show because it’s slapstick, zaniness that those rascals pieced together through Zoom rehearsals, people leaving, newcomers arriving,” Leader said. “At times it was pure mayhem. But I wouldn’t have missed a minute of it! I wish all our actors and our incredible staff, Stephanie Auranomo, Eric Hegi, Samantha Kinney, Anita Mannix, and our backstage crew to keep up the excellent work, camaraderie, and laughs! Of course, having the board that we do is just sublime, too.”

“Turtles on the Tarmac” will begin with a reception and silent auction at Bay Street Theater starting at 3 p.m. on Saturday, April 29. Following the performance at 4 p.m., a live auction will be held led by guest auctioneer and Wölffer Estate winemaker Roman Roth. Tickets start at \$25 (\$10 for students, children and individuals living in group homes) at

baystreet.org. Preferred seating is \$75. To learn more about East End Special Players, visit eastendspecialplayers.org. Bay Street Theater is on Long Wharf in Sag Harbor.