



PLANTING SEEDS OF JOY

Piti Theatre Company combines entertainment, education and nature for all ages

By Eveline MacDougall

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PLANTING SEEDS OF JOY

Children rehearsing at Bloom
Inset: Improv Residency at Sheffield Elementary in Turners Falls.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JONATHAN MIRIN, PITI THEATRE COMPANY

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By Eveline MacDougall
For Valley Kids

Jonathan Mirin and Godeliève Richard founded Piti Theatre Company over 20 years ago, and they entertain, educate, and change the lives of people of all ages around the world. They have many programs for children and teens coming up, and are launching Bloom, an arts and ecology center on 37 acres in Charlemont. "We got a grant to turn a barn into a theater," said Mirin. "We're excited to host classes and events for all ages."

Mirin is an American playwright and actor; Richard is a Swiss choreographer, dancer, and visual artist. In Europe, their home base is Les Ponts-de-Martel, Switzerland. The name of

their company (pronounced "PEA-tea") is an ancient Indian (Pali) word that can be translated as joy or rapture. Their offerings include after-school programs, whole-family activities, in-school residencies, summer programs, and touring performances.

"I was a theater kid," said Mirin. "I got hooked in high school; I had a great drama teacher. I did more theatre at Swarthmore

(College), and then went straight to New York City. I got involved with Neighborhood Playhouse, and enjoyed traveling and acting."

Along the way, Mirin discovered Vipassana meditation, also referred to as insight meditation. "It shifted my inner artistic landscape," said Mirin. "I realized I wanted to create my own plays. I wanted to feel like the work I was doing could benefit the audience, the actors,



PAUL FRANZ PHOTO



Piti Theatre Improv Show at New Hingham Elementary, Carol Lollis photo; A Bee and Blossom participant works on a mural, photo courtesy of Jonathan Mirin, Piti Theatre Company; Jonathan Mirin and Laura Josephs in To Bee, Isaac Harrell photo; Rodney Moore (left) as Charles Green and Djeli Celestia (right) as John Putnam with Piti Youth Troupe members in Night at the Museum, Piti's docu-drama about local African-American history, photo courtesy of Jonathan Mirin, Piti Theatre Company

everyone involved." Mirin's journeys led him to the Edinburgh (Scotland) Fringe Festival, where he met Godeliève, who would become his wife.

Godeliève Richard grew up in a Swiss family of visual artists; she gravitated chiefly to dance. "I went to dance schools in Cannes and in Montreal," she said, "where I studied classical, modern, and many other forms." A key element in Richard's life is her love of nature; she, her husband, and their son, Ezekiel, spend a great deal of time outdoors. "I love

working with children, passing the day outside where we can be near a stream. Our new center is focused on arts and ecology because I like to help people connect to nature, to respect nature, and to express themselves creatively." Richard sees dance as "very healthy. It gets us moving and helps bring out creativity." Her interest in health also led Richard to study herbalism, which she says has helped her with various health challenges.

One of the many programs offered by Piti is

Valley Playwright Mentoring (VPM), an after school program occurring from October through May that encourages teens to transform personal stories into performance.

"VPM is currently available in Greenfield, Shelburne Falls, and Holyoke," said Mirin. For younger kids, there's Youth Troupe, an after school program in Greenfield and Shelburne Falls designed for ages 8 - 12 where participants create a performance inspired by their

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Upcoming Events through Piti Theatre Company

(know before you go / confirm times @ ptco.org)

- Valley Playwright Mentoring Holyoke and Greenfield Troupes Spring Performance Dates tba @ ptco.org/vpm
- 5/30: Shelburne Falls Youth Troupe Presents "The Endless Adventure" (working title) @ the Water Street Barn, Shelburne Falls, 5/30 @ 5 pm
- 6/28: Story Wizards @ Workshop13, Ware
- Dino Trail Week, 7/5 - 7/13 (ptco.org/dino)**
 - 7/5: Dinosaur Day with Paleontologist Barbie & Ken @ Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield: Local History Day with Jurassic Roadshow's real fossils
 - 7/9: Dino Trails Day @ the Beneski Museum of Natural History: 10AM - Noon Scavenger Hunts, Guided Tours and at 2:30PM Piti's Story Wizards, Amherst College
 - 7/10: Evolution Revolution @ Springfield Museums: Hands on activities & preview the New Dino Exhibit
 - 7/11: Kidleidoscope Story Hour: Dinosaurs at 10:30 a.m. + Talk by Dr. Paul Olsen, time tba @ the Great Falls Discovery Center, Turners Falls
 - 7/12: Story Wizards @ the Greenfield Public Library, 7/12 @ 10:30 am (Dino-Theme for Dino Trail Week)
 - 7/13: Sensory Friendly Dino Family Fun Day @ Wistariahurst Museum, Holyoke: Dino Dance Off, Scavenger Hunt & Dino Tracks
 - 8/18 - 8/22: Theater + Nature for ages 8+, Charlemont
 - 8/25 - 8/29: Theater + Nature for ages 8+, Charlemont

Bee and Blossom, Valley Playwright Mentoring and Youth Troupes start their seasons

- 10/4: Dance and Choreography Workshop Student Performance, Bloom Center, Charlemont

MATTHEW CAVANAGH PHOTO



Jonathan Mirin and Godeliève Richard, founders of Piti Theatre Company; Jason Montgomery, Artistic Mentor for Valley Playwright Mentoring in Holyoke and Valley Arts Mentors, Piti's program for early career artists.

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ideas and improvisations. And for kids eight years old and younger, there's Bee & Blossom, an arts and nature program.

Piti's school residencies have taken place in many regional elementary, middle, and high schools. "Our residencies allow schools to add a theatrical element to the curriculum," said Mirin. Current programs include Improv and Page to Stage, a program for ELA classes. An offering called Your Town encourages students to focus on local history, and the popular To Bee or Not to Bee leads to a large-cast performance of an environmentally themed show.

That already sounds like a lot, but Piti offers much more: since 2017, they've collaborated with the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association on the Great Greenfield DinoFest. The troupe is broadening the program, geographically, to present a Valley-wide coalition of Dino-themed institutions to produce Dino Trail Week from July 9 - 13. Also this summer, they're doing theatre and nature programs at Bloom the last two weeks of August.

Piti offerings extend beyond solely theatrical, thanks to Richard's training and skills. For youngsters 12 and up, there are weekend sessions of dance and choreography that culminate with an October performance. In addition to running participatory programs, the Piti folks also present their own work internationally. (Check out the sidebar for upcoming programs and shows.)

"Piti programming plants seeds of joy, sustainability and justice in hearts, minds, and communities," said co-founder Mirin. "Our local programming is dedicated to engaging underserved rural communities across Franklin County. We also facilitate unique cultural and human connections between Switzerland and the U.S. by creating shows in French and English and offering the possi-

bility of artist/student exchange between the two countries."

Longtime educator Susan Pelis, who's taught in the Gill-Montague School District for 20 years, is a big fan: "Piti builds community, makes everyone feel welcome, and provides a safe place for children to be known and to be themselves. We've brought them into the Sheffield School to facilitate improv with our students, which has helped with mediation and conflict resolution." Pelis added that pandemic-related disruptions negatively impacted many children. "Kids were isolated all those years, and not socializing. (Teachers) needed to keep adapting to meet kids' needs. Jon (Mirin) and Laura (Josephs, a Piti colleague) had a wonderful impact on our school. The most reticent child in the classroom just blossomed. Jon's personality really works with children. He's present, kind, and brings cool props."

Perhaps the most compelling recommendation comes from a young person who participated in Piti programs. Quinn Mass is a Valley Playwright Mentoring graduate now studying at Swarthmore College. "VPM was an amazing experience," said Mass. "I joined while a junior at GHS. My little sister signed up with her friend, and I had to drive them. The program sounded fun, so I went along and helped do a show about mental health. I enjoyed every session. It was such a welcoming community, and it became my favorite part of the week."

Eveline MacDougall is the author of "Fiery Hope" and, for a decade, participated in traveling theatre companies. To reach: eveline@amandlachorus.org.