

3 ALBUM REVIEW

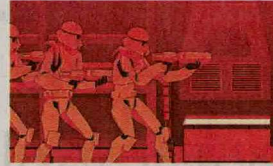
Lil Nas X's debut goes deeper.

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The worlds of Japanese anime and 'Star Wars' join forces. BY MIKE HALE

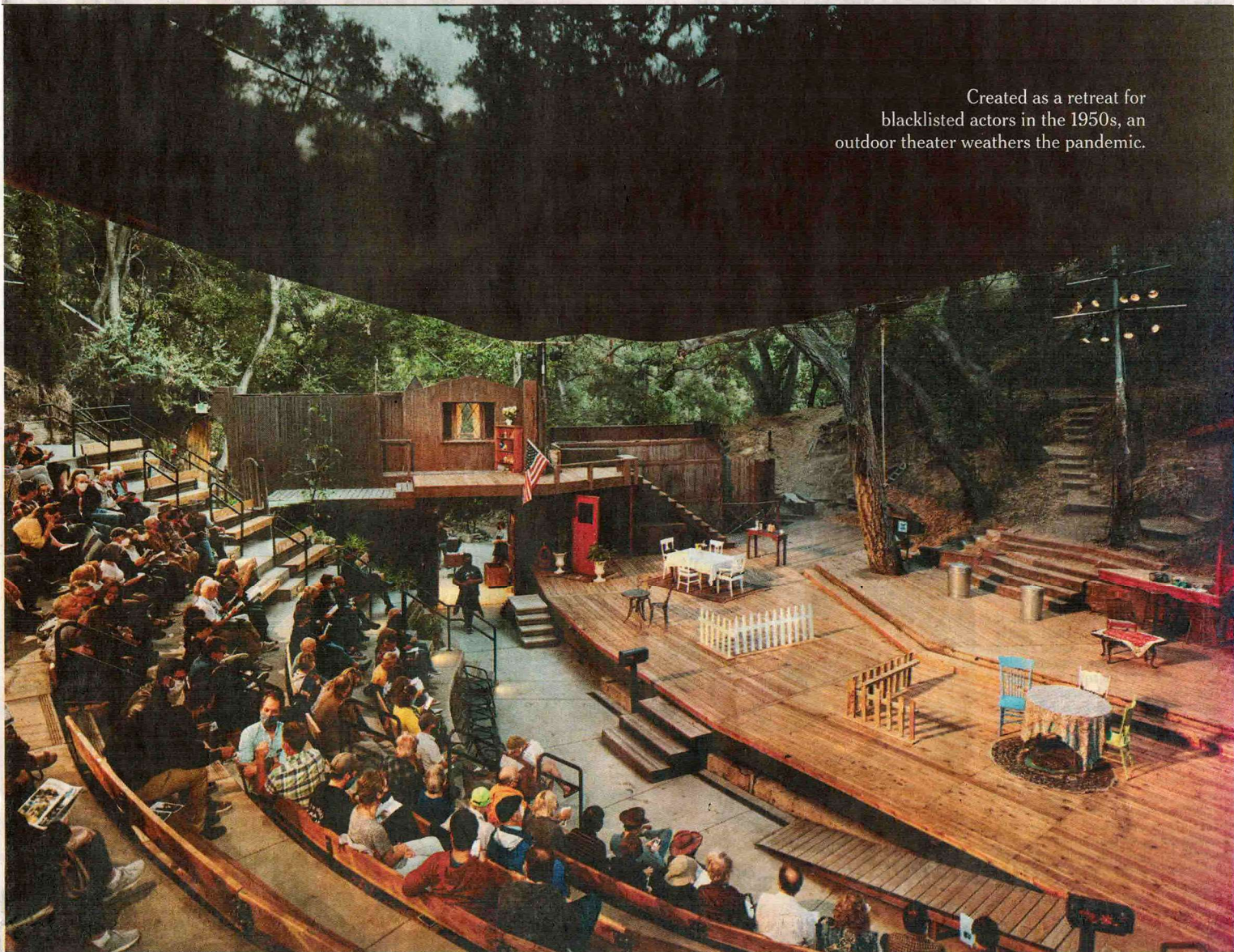
NEWS | CRITICISM

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2021 C1

# Arts

The New York Times

Created as a retreat for blacklisted actors in the 1950s, an outdoor theater weathers the pandemic.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM AMENGAJ, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Deep in a California Canyon, An Artistic Vision Endures

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

TOPANGA, CALIF. — There were no famous names in the cast. It was the first staged professional production by a little-known playwright. And the theater was deep in the canyons of the Santa Monica Mountains, up a long windy road, midway between the beaches of the Pacific Ocean and the San Fernando Valley, a secluded bohemian outpost known for its artists, musicians and rattlesnakes.

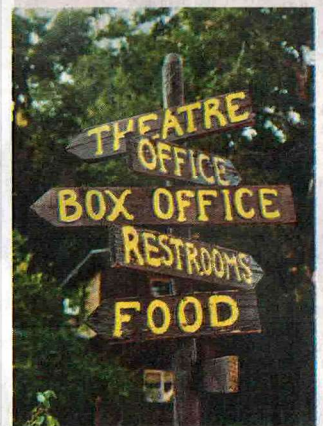
But for all that, there were plenty of people at Will Geer's Theatericum Botanicum on

a recent Sunday night for a performance of "The Last, Best Small Town." Wearing masks as required by the theater, 150 patrons sat on hard wooden benches on a cool summer night. A cast of eight actors exuberantly navigated the sprawling, asymmetrical stage, built around a California live oak tree and into the scrub of a hillside, scurrying along dirt trails to make their exit stage lefts and enter stage rights.

The Theatericum Botanicum was born amid the McCarthy-era political furor over concerns about alleged Communist infiltration of Hollywood in the 1950s. It began as a

retreat in the mountains where blacklisted actors, led by Will Geer, who had refused to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, gathered to perform Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams for small audiences who wandered in off North Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

But this remote theater-in-the-woods, which for years was mainly known to an inside crowd of Topanga neighbors and the few theatergoers familiar with its history, is drawing crowds this summer even as it pushes ahead in the middle of a pandemic.



Top, Will Geer's Theatericum Botanicum, a theater in the Santa Monica Mountains. Above, signs direct patrons around the outpost.

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# In a California Canyon, a Vision Endures

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The actors are appearing on a new stage, rebuilt with a grant while the theater was dark last season, replacing a jumble of dirt and rotting wood.

"This gorgeous outdoor space — it's perfect for these times," said Alan Blumenfeld, an actor who has been a member of the theater company for 36 years.

It has been drawing crowds of people who have been showing up with their proof-of-vaccination cards to take in a night of alfresco theater. (Unlike the East Coast, where rained-out performances have been common this summer, there is little chance that an outdoor show will get called for rain in any year, but particularly in the middle of the extended drought that has gripped the region.) The night before "The Last, Best Small Town" had drawn 150 people, close to 300 people showed up for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — an unusually high turnout at any time, and no matter that the official seating capacity is 299.

"People feel safer coming," said Willow Geer, Will Geer's granddaughter and who appears in this year's production of "Julius Caesar" as Portia. "And that has helped our situation."

But its appeal is more than offering an under-the-stars, open-air stage in a year when many of the region's small theaters, cramped and poorly ventilated, remain closed. The Theatricum Botanicum is idiosyncratic and unique, defined as much by its remote splendor as by the circumstances of its founding. Its legacy has been carefully tended by the members of the Geer family who have run and acted in this theater since Will Geer died in 1978, and who have found its ideological sensibilities particularly relevant during a time of pandemic and polarization.

"Theatricum Botanicum is to the Los Angeles theater scene what Topanga Canyon is to Los Angeles itself: It's technically a part of the city, but it's a world on its own," said Steven Leigh Morris, the publisher of Stage Raw, a publication devoted to Los Angeles arts and culture. "It continues the legacy of Woody Guthrie and the F.D.R. sensibility to give people a break who otherwise wouldn't have gotten a break. I have a soft spot for them. I really respect people who do this for a purpose. It's not just vanity."

Zev Yaroslavsky, who represented Topanga and helped win the theater county arts subsidies when he was a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, called it a "civil liberties billboard."

"When I think of Topanga Canyon and the Theatricum Botanicum, it's a constant history lesson of what can happen even in a democracy like ours when people stop being diligent," said Yaroslavsky, who now teaches at the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles. "The whole DNA of that theater is about eternal vigilance."

Ellen Geer, a daughter of Will Geer and the theater's artistic director, took delight the other day in recounting 70 years of history — of her family and the theater; they are that intertwined — as she led a leisurely walk across the 15 acres of gardens, theaters and shacks, including one where Guthrie, who was friends with Will Geer, lived for a time in the early 1950s.

"You must come back in the spring; there are daffodils on the hill," said Ellen Geer, gesturing to the back of the stage as she settled into one of the benches in the amphitheater. "I think there's a fox that lives in a hole up there."

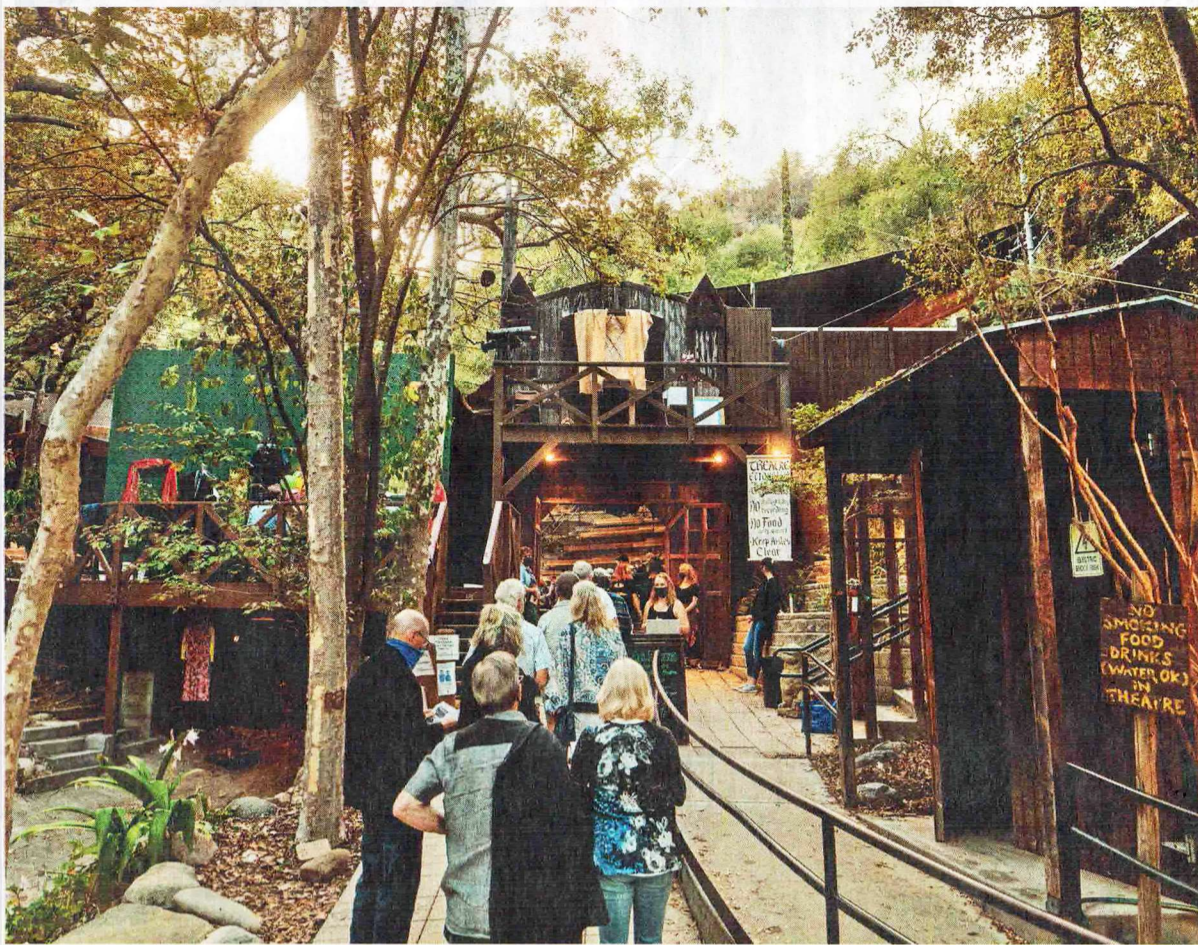
Her daughter Willow called it "a smaller, more rustic, honey Hollywood Bowl."

"My mother made me promise," she said, "that when she's gone, I wouldn't let anyone pave the parking lot."

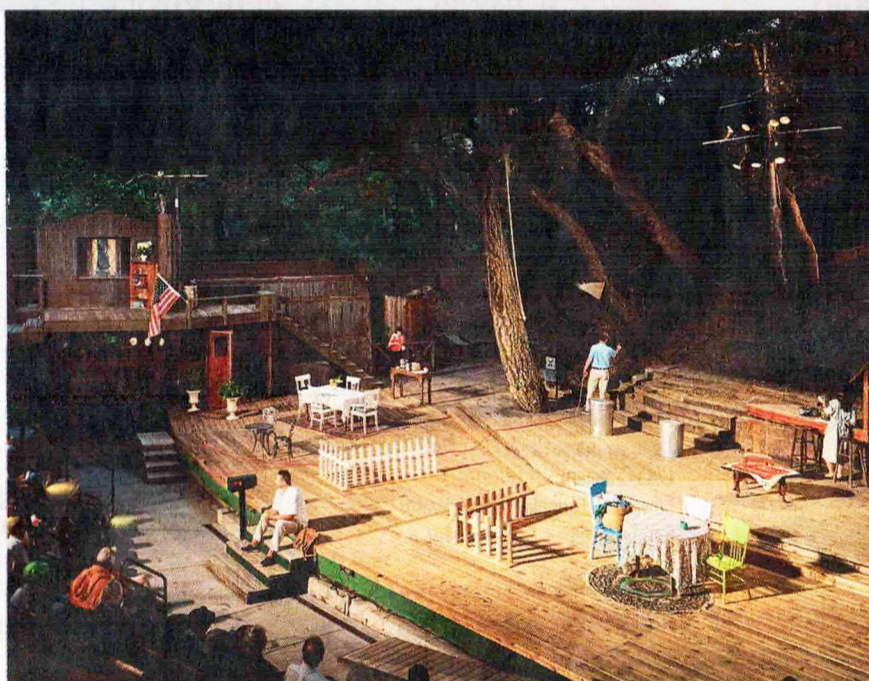
The theater's namesake, Will Geer — whose ashes are buried in the Shakespeare Garden, close to those of his onetime wife, the actress Herta Ware — is popularly known for playing Grandpa on the television show "The Waltons." But that was a late-career resurrection for a well-known stage-and-screen actor who starred in "The Cradle Will Rock," the leftist 1937 play about unionizing the steel industry, directed by Orson Welles.

Geer was blacklisted in 1951 when he invoked his Fifth Amendment rights in response to questions about Communist infiltration of Hollywood before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. After Geer, unable to get work on-stage or on-screen, lost his home in Santa Monica, he and Ware bought land here, about 25 miles from downtown Los Angeles.

Geer, a horticulturist by education, grew vegetables to feed his family. (Hence the name Theatricum Botanicum, which roughly translates to botanical theater.) And he began assembling other blacklisted actors for impromptu performances in the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM AMENGUAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga, Calif., which for decades has been staging plays like a recent performance of "The Last, Best Small Town," above. The actor Will Geer, above right, established the theater in the 1950s as a retreat for blacklisted actors. Ellen Geer, right, his daughter, is now its artistic director. Below left, actors in a dressing room prepared for the performance of "The Last, Best Small Town." Below right, Katia Gomez and Kelvin Morales took the stage before a crowd of about 150 vaccinated people.

mountains. After a few years, Geer left Topanga and moved across the country, picking up occasional acting jobs. (He and Ware eventually divorced, but they remained friends.) With the money he earned from "The Waltons," he returned to Topanga, gathered his family together, formally incorporated the Theatricum Botanicum in 1973 and built the amphitheater. It now has a \$1 million budget, with a company of about 50 actors and 20 crew members.

Ellen Geer has been artistic director since her father died, and has shaped the theater's repertory to reflect the circumstances of the original troupe of actors who appeared here. The program is heavy on classics — Shakespeare, Molière — and Geer presents them in a way to assure their relevance to the time.

For "Julius Caesar," she wrote in an opening narration to underscore the contemporary resonances.

"We're here to witness the story of a country's disintegration," the narrator said,



GEER FAMILY, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

as the sunlight slowly faded and as the occasional bat fluttered across the stage. "A conspiracy among the wealthy senate is rising to protect the great democratic republic from a brewing dictatorship from Caesar. How does this happen to a thriving nation? Will you join me and become the citizens of Rome? If we don't speak up, fellow citizens of Rome, we could lose our democracy!"

"The Last, Best Small Town," by John Guerra, a homage to "Our Town," is the story of a Latino family and a white family, neighbors in Fillmore, Calif., dealing with economic, class and racial strife during the subprime mortgage crisis that disrupted the nation's housing market starting in 2007. "She really wanted to do that play," Guerra, 33, said later about Ellen Geer. "It's a good fit for the theater."

The theater has adapted during the pandemic. It has two understudies for each role. The cast and crew are required to be vaccinated; an actor who played the changing child in "Midsummer" was removed from the cast because he was too young to be vaccinated. This is an every-one-pitch-in kind of operation: Actors in "Julius Caesar" arrived early to sweep the stage and set up the furniture; members of the cast of "Midsummer" were taking tickets and showing patrons to their seats.

Ellen Geer, who played Sunshine Doré in the 1971 dark-comedy death-and-romance classic "Harold and Maude," just turned 80 and is no longer acting. She is preparing to retire soon as artistic director, handing over the job to Willow, who is 40. But even as she approaches the end of her career, she has strong feelings about the role of theater in the face of a pandemic.

"You know how many parks there are?" she asked. "You producers, get yourselves together, go get a park. Just do it! Go into some rich person's backyard. It's no excuse to stop. It's very important to do theater now."

