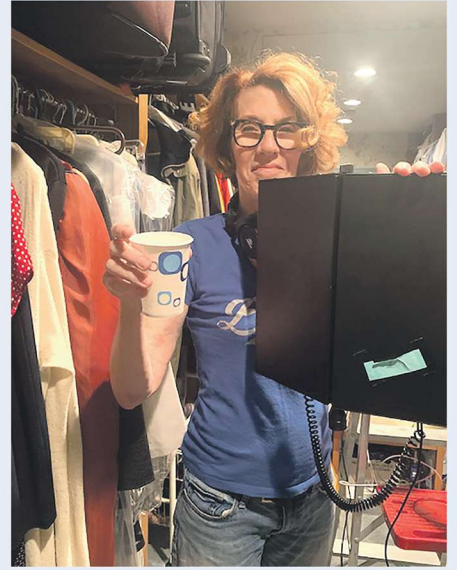


Glendale News-Press

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Brand's Death the Topic of '90201' Audio Play



Photos courtesy Antaeus Theatre Company

Actors Alexandra Hellquist, Peter James Smith and Kitty Swink make up the cast of "The Six Pianos of Miradero," one of the latest "Zip Code Plays" produced by Antaeus Theatre Company. The audio drama concerns the reading of the will for famed developer Leslie Brand in 1925.

By Zane Hill
Glendale News-Press

The Antaeus Theatre Company will drop season three of its "Zip Code Plays: Los Angeles" series next week — among which includes a Glendale podcast-style play.

Subtitled "The Six Pianos of Miradero," the "91201: Glendale" audio play takes us into a sever-

al-minute window to 1925, when the Jewel City had just 40,000 residents and Leslie Brand — the prominent developer whose name lives on through the boulevard, the park and the library — has died. Brand's widow, Mary Louise, prepares to meet with her late husband's attorney for the reading of the will — but, so it seems, another woman, Birdie, is also waiting.

Guess though you can, you'll have to listen to find out why.

"Everyone's got their sordid past and he thought that he successfully buried his, but he was wrong," playwright Alex Goldberg said in an interview. "It took a long time for that story to come out in the research that I did."

Conceived by the Glendale-based theater company, the first season of these ZIP code plays premiered a year ago. Ranging anywhere from a dozen minutes to a half-hour, the brief audio plays

evoke the era of the radio drama and explore small, unique stories from their titular Los Angeles-area communities. A second season was produced and released mid-year and the third uploads for streaming on Dec. 2.

"I don't think we had any sense until the first season dropped what a phenomenon it would be. I'm so proud and excited that the plays have taken off this way," said Kitty Swink, the onetime Antaeus

artistic director who plays Mary Louise Brand in "Six Pianos." "I knew that people would listen around the world, but I didn't know that they would listen in such magnitude."

For the "hometown" Glendale play, Goldberg — a member of Antaeus' Playwrights Lab — dove into the lesser-known parts of Brand's legacy. Last year, he penned

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"90272: Annexing the Palisades," which revisited the white supremacist roots in the Pacific Palisades.

"I'm definitely finding my niche with digging historical dirt in L.A. and dramatizing that," Goldberg said. "What interested me is that we hear about these people who do great wonderful things — and this doesn't take anything away from Leslie Brand's legacy — but everyone has their own personal issues and people get put on the way-side. When empires are built, it's on the backs of other people and they largely remain anonymous. This is for those who aren't remembered."

Alongside Swink, Playwright's Lab member Alexandra Hellquist plays the mysterious Birdie, while guest actor Peter James Smith voices John Lloyd Henderson, Brand's bumbling attorney. Lisa Sanaye Dring, a friend of Goldberg's, directed as a guest artist for Antaeus.

"They have such a deep bench of talent," Goldberg said of Antaeus. "They have really wonderful actors and that's why the Playwright's Lab is such a success. The hardest part was deciding which awesome actors we wanted to use."

"It sounds great to hear them do it," he added, of this cast. "Every writer has that dread that they've wasted everyone's time, but they made me feel better about that. They pulled off wonderful things."

In light of the ongoing pandemic, voice actors made use of improvised home recording studios, using materials delivered by Antaeus. The actors got creative here, with closets becoming fortified to keep out exterior noise. Linked in one stream via the internet, the actors were able to, in a way, record together.

"I've been really grateful to the community for this whole ongoing thing, so I was excited to get to do this with them," Hellquist said. "I'm really glad and honored that they thought of me. It's such a beautiful medium for storytelling. In a time when getting together in person was so fraught, I thought this was a beautiful way to get together."

Smith agreed.

"Just to act with them during a pandemic, when we hadn't seen each other in months, was nice," he said. "There was something about having them in your ear that was more intimate than Zoom. It was a lot more like being in the room with them."

Swink said she enjoyed being a part of the Glendale addition to the "Zip Code Play" library and found Mary Louise Brand an interesting voice to portray.

"She's both really forward-thinking and also really stuck in her class structure and sense of who she is. It's both sides of the same coin — it's always fun to play someone that complex," she said. "Lisa was a terrific director and Alex is a great writer. It was a wonderful experience and during the pandemic I've done a couple of dramatic form podcasts. When you're stuck in your house, it's fun to find something creative to do."

The bulk of the dialogue in "Six Pianos" follows a back-and-forth between Mary Louise and Birdie. Their conversations explore the full breadth of emotions and the play ends on more of a question mark than a cliff hanger — as if to provoke a "What now?" query.

Swink said her prior working relationship with Hellquist helped them create an authentic dynamic

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when rehearsing and recording their roles, without having to go through the usual ice-breaker steps between new collaborators.

"We didn't have to form that connection. One of the great things about being an ensemble of actors is that we already know each other, and you don't have to do those tentative steps you need to when you walk into a room with strangers," Swink added. "These women, they both have animosity for each other and great respect for each other in the play, and they form some kind of a bond together at the end. I think [Hellquist] and I succeeded at that. We enjoyed creating that together."

As more of an invented character, the lawyer serves to periodically break the tension while also occasionally fueling it. Although well-intentioned, the character is both a bit clumsy and also simply cornered by an awkward situation. At one point, he pedantically corrects Mary Louise in a manner that emphasizes his past-tense existence.

"That was an interesting balance, because how rude is he there? Or is he just kind of clueless?" Smith said. "At first I was trying to 'do a voice,' but as I talked over it more, it became more realistic. I didn't think too much about sounding realistic, but more about calming a woman down."

"I think that Lisa definitely helped bring the humor in," he added. "I think I was taking it a bit too seriously at first, so that was fun."

Dring lauded Goldberg for addressing an "unusual story with a ton of compassion," and in a way that, in the end, still celebrates Glendale history.

"Every play is its own universe, and you knead it with what you have," she said of directing. "What I think about is how to serve the playwright's voice. In this piece, I got super lucky because the actors were all phenomenal, so it wasn't a heavy lift to celebrate the text that Alex has given us."

Though Antaeus expects to return to stage performances soon, the ZIP code plays have

presented an interesting opportunity for the company. Whether fictionalized or adapted, they touch upon specific pieces Los Angeles-area history and culture, as if to highlight the world unto itself in the Southland. Their podcast form also suits Los Angeles well, given how often we're waiting in traffic.

"It's there in a way I can digest," Dring said. "It doesn't feel didactic. It doesn't feel like I'm learning history. It feels like I'm in a world that existed a long time ago."

Swink said she felt grateful for the opportunity to tell these stories and give Los Angeles its day in the sun, as far as historical drama goes. In her experience, she said, people tend to consider eastern cities such as New York, Chicago or Philadelphia when pondering American history.

As an example, Swink said a friend of hers in Northern Ireland has enjoyed the productions for the image they paint of Los Angeles.

"He said 'When I think of Los Angeles, I think of the beach or Universal Studios,' or certain other very specific things," she said. "He just had no image of L.A. being this multicultural and having all of these dynamic stories. It was just really interesting to hear his perspective."

All involved were careful to note that, in the current climate of reexamining historical figures, "Six Pianos" should not be viewed as dismissing Brand's contributions to building Glendale. Rather, they contended, it simply brings him down to Earth, where we can examine him as the nuanced man that he ultimately was.

"It's better for all of us when historical figure are humanized," Hellquist said. "I think that's a really interesting thing about this script. It's a process that America is going through in general, looking at lionized historical figures and seeing them as more complex individuals than the statue might suggest. I think that's good for all of us."

"The Six Pianos of Miradero" will be available for streaming at Antaeus.org and other podcast streaming services on Thursday, Dec. 2. The prior two seasons of the "Zip Code Plays" remain available for listening.

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