

# Rock River Players one-act festival honors Ely's memory

By Annie Landenberger  
The Commons

**W**ILLIAMSVILLE—For the fifth year running, the Rock River Players (RRP) evening of one-act plays is back, with a big following, and with original works, usually by area playwrights, and, each year, with newcomers to the RRP.

This year marks another stride with the renaming of the festival as The Annual Tom Ely Festival of One-Acts to honor the memory of Tom Ely, a core company member who died in 2025.

Ely, distinguished for building camaraderie in a company, for anticipating and addressing cast needs, and for modeling both professionalism and community spirit in all he did, shared the belief that participating in theater is about much more than being on stage.

The annual festival will now celebrate Ely's lasting legacy of inclusion and the spirit of exploration he brought to every production, says RRP Artistic Director Amy Donahue.

According to a RRP media release, the 2026 one-act lineup "offers moments of laughter and reflection, exploring universal themes of family, memory, technology, connection, and grief," through three "distinct lenses."

Featured in this year's 90-minute program will be *The Mockingbird's Nest*, by Craig Bailey. Directed by Shey Nessralla, it's "a futuristic satire examining the intersection of technology, human connection, and the lengths we're willing to go to alleviate our guilt."

*Work and Play*, written and directed by Jon DeAngelis, "provides a riotous collision between the past and present, bringing the audience into one family's 1940s living room, until their quintessential domestic life is interrupted by the distractions of modern life."

Finally, *Advocate for the Dead*, by Miles Ledoux and directed by Kay Beckett, "brings an original Agatha Christie adaptation to the stage with

an atmospheric drama set against the cliffs of Mallorca, exploring themes of mortality and the paths we leave behind."

Originally on the program, *The Bench*, by John Swartz, will be postponed due to health issues. It would have been directed by Charlene Kennedy.

## The creative process

*The Commons* had a chance to talk with a few company members recently.

DeAngelis, a drama therapist with a master's in the field from New York University, has owned property in Guilford for 10 years, to which he and his husband moved to live full time last summer.

One of the three hosts of the *Drama Therapy Radiopodcast* and founder of a new practice, Vermont Nature Therapy, DeAngelis has a background in performance, directing, playwriting, and producing.

His play, one of the first he wrote, was first produced by New Jersey's Chatham Players: "It's really experimental. I don't want to give anything away, but I guess the question I'd ask is: 'How would a family in the 1940s react to today's theater culture?'"

"Yeah, let's leave it at that," he says, smiling wryly.

Of working with the RRP, DeAngelis says, "Amy [Donahue] has been incredible. The cast is great. The auditions were very fun."

He says it was "reassuring to see everyone knew each other." As a "newbie," he says, "they were all very welcoming to me."

Actress Dyana Lee, who plays a "desperate widow" in *Advocate for the Dead*, reflected on her life in the theater, which began with professional aspirations and training in a couple of highly-regarded programs such as New York's HB Studio.

Lee pivoted, though, in the Reagan era, when "funding for the arts had been dramatically cut, just when I was starting out as a young theater professional. I was finding it very difficult to make a living." She turned to law and honed a career primarily in government positions.

When still working full time in New York City, she says, "I bought my house in Guilford, and I just changed my life." Then roughly two years ago, "I found myself in a position where I could actually relocate full time. I got here. It was November, and it was cold. And I thought, 'Gee, how am I going to make a new community for myself?'"

She first started going to St. Michael's Episcopal Church and then became involved with Guilford Center Stage. Soon, she found herself with the RRP and has since been in its full-length and one-act plays.

"The most important work that I've done at Rock River was [playing Fanny Steimer] in *The Freeing of Molly Steimer*, in 2025, a production that she describes as "a really amazing piece of theater."

"So that was it. My second life as an actress was launched," she says, happy to be "back to my real love."

"Frankly, this time around, it's even better because of the theater community here, the community you find when you're putting together a piece of theater and you're working with people at all levels," Lee says. "It's amazing."

Shey Nessralla had never done theater until three years ago, when his entrance was in set building, stage management, and design with the RRP. He's since been in two one-act festivals and two full-length RRP productions, including last summer's *The Freeing of Mollie Steimer*, in which he played The Bug.

Still "doing all the behind-the-scenes stuff," Nessralla tries his hand at directing for the first time with this production.

"I'm really enjoying this process," he says, noting that with his work experience he finds it easy to lead a team collaboratively.

"And I'd say, I understand more about acting now that I'm directing," Nessralla continues. "It's been an interesting journey seeing what my actors need for remembering lines or blocking — being really open in communication with them and then saying the things that were helpful for me as an actor and learning things



COURTESY PHOTO  
Amy Donahue and Susan Boyd Joyce rehearse a scene from "The Mockingbird's Nest," one of four short plays presented by the Rock River Players as part of its annual Tom Ely Festival of One-Acts.

from them that they need. I'm working with two very experienced actors, so I'm learning so much from them."

Acknowledging that "the overall vision I had was something that was subject to change," Nessralla says that once he started collaborating with the actors and "the energy they give their characters, the vision did change. And it keeps changing and it keeps evolving into the piece that all three of us want it to be."

Nessralla adds candidly that he's "still so in the beginning of theater that these things still make me emotional."

"I just cried at the last rehearsal because [technical director] Jess Guerrero came and I got to see it under the lights: the [cast members] didn't need a line; they didn't need anything; they just went. And I got emotional halfway through because I didn't expect it."

RRP Artistic Director Amy Donahue is also producer of the one-act festival in which she also acts. How does she juggle?

"I don't do it alone!" she says. "I feel fortunate to have such wonderful collaborators in the RRP community.

The magic happens because everyone involved is just as invested in the outcome as I am. We're all here because of how much we love the work, and that makes the heavy lifting feel much lighter.

"I'm always blown away by the talent that emerges from all around us each year — from the worlds built by each of the local playwrights, to new and seasoned actors exploring their narratives together, and directors bringing each story to life through their unique perspectives," Donahue says.

Performances are at the *Williamsville Hall*, 35 Dover Rd, Williamsville, Thursday through Saturday, May 21-23, at 7 p.m., and Sunday, May 24 at 3 p.m. In the spirit of making the arts accessible to all, RRP, with this production, launches a sliding-scale ticket price range of \$15 to \$25 for general admission, with no one turned away for lack of funds. Tickets are available both in advance at [rockriverplayers.org](http://rockriverplayers.org), or at the door (with cash, check, card, or Venmo/PayPal). For more information, contact [info@rockriverplayers.org](mailto:info@rockriverplayers.org).

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