ARTS

"We get some money and we buy a cheap wine."
HALF A MILE AWAY BILLY JOEL

Yale Rep show to challenge expectations about disability, inheritance

BY JOANNE HWANG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



COURTESY OF MARIA BARANOVA
Anne Gridley's "Watch Me Walk" aims to explore her disability, which results in difficulty walking, and the associated themes of pity and inheritance while striking a humorous tone. Previews at the Yale Repertory Theatre will begin on Saturday.

Before Anne Gridley had a play, she had a title — one she thought was very funny.

The phrase "Watch Me Walk" struck a chord of irony with Gridley, a playwright who has hereditary spastic paraplegia. The incurable condition is a progressive disorder resulting in difficulty walking.

Opening next Thursday at the Yale Repertory Theatre, "Watch Me Walk" is a comedy drawn from Gridley's experience with restricted mobility due to HSP. With development and production support from Yale's Binger Center for New Theatre, the play tackles themes of disability, pity and inheritance. By watching Gridley walk throughout the performance, the play sets out to upend what audiences expect from a story about illness.

"Walking with Anne is about being aware," Eric Ting, the show's director, said in a video interview. "You spend more time thinking of your surroundings because I'm not thinking about my destination. I'm thinking about the journey."

Ting said he and Gridley chose to start the play in a striking way. At the beginning of "Watch Me Walk," Gridley walks back and forth across the stage for three to five minutes without saying a word. In that scene, Gridley highlights the irony between hypervisibility and invisibility that comes with living with HSP.

"For most people, she's either completely invisible to them, or they're paying so much attention to her," Ting said. "We thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we could just invite the audience to watch Anne walk?'"

Gridley, who primarily has experience as a performer, said she never thought she wanted to write a play until she was inspired by her humorous title. Then, a colleague who knew of her idea for "Watch Me Walk" told the organizers of CUNY's PRELUDE Festival — an annual showcase of new work by theater artists — that Gridley had a play. Gridley had no script, so she had to come up with one.

"I panic-wrote about 20 minutes of material using doctor's notes from MyChart, and things that I had heard on the streets of New York, people saying wacky things to me, and a poem of my mother's," Gridley said.

Ting saw that early version at PRELUDE in October 2023 and was inspired by Gridley's bravery to be vulnerable. He approached Gridley about commissioning a full play, which was first produced at the Soho Rep this January.

"I was so struck by this question about what we inherit from our ancestors," Ting said. "It's not just biological; it's social. It's a kind of worldview of how we live in our bodies and see our own value."

The process of bringing the ideas to life began with fleshing out the script, Gridley said. But writing about her family history was harder than Gridley expected, she said. According to Gridley, relatives who might have answered her questions had passed away before she began working on the play.

Once Gridley had sorted through what she could of her family history, she and Ting turned to the question of how to stage it. With the Soho Rep team, they tested out "crazy ideas" and leaned into the play's comedy.

"One very interesting thing we did was we just had Anne walk back and forth in the rehearsal hall and videotaped her," Ting said. "We would ask Anne questions, and she would answer as she was walking."

According to Ting, walking invites the audience to slow down, allowing them to notice the many juxtapositions that shape the play.

"There is a kind of genre of theater, right, that puts the other on stage, and often, audiences come to that genre with an expectation that it will be a trauma narrative," Ting said. "I think Anne's play goes into that with an awareness of that assumption. It doesn't completely reject it, but it does acknowledge and embrace it, then seek to subvert it."

That subversion is rooted in the structure of the play, said Ting. Audiences may arrive expecting a solo show, but Gridley introduces two men carrying her around the stage.

"I wanted to add two very handsome men to the mix," Gridley said. "People who could do a tap routine the same every time, as opposed to me who can do a version of a tap routine, and depending on how generous you will interpret it, it will be different every time."

All of these choices bring the audience back to the central themes of the play — family and inheritance — Gridley said.

"The last binary in 'Watch Me Walk' is the notion of the family that you're born into and the family that you find," Ting said. "This is a piece about the family that Anne is born into because of the hereditary nature of HSP, but also the family that Anne finds, which is the family of theater."

Evan Yionoulis, the dean of the David Geffen School of Drama and artistic director of the Yale Rep, wrote in an email to the News that she is excited to present Gridley's "Watch Me Walk."

"Her performance is funny and brave, full of wit and very affecting," Yionoulis wrote. "She brings to the stage a personal story that connects with audiences and tells it with raw honesty and theatrical panache."

Gridley, who is working at the Yale Rep for the first time, said she is excited to bring the show to New Haven. Ultimately, she said, she wants the story to resonate with the audience even after the curtain falls.

"I hope that they question how they interact with disabled folks," Gridley said. "I hope that they will have a connection to their own family histories."

Previews for "Watch Me Walk" at the Yale Repertory Theatre will begin on Saturday. The show will run until Dec. 5.

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'Community Day' connects YCBA to locals through clay, picture books

BY BRETT PENK
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Anyone and everyone was welcome to the Yale Center for British Art's biannual community day on Sunday.

The event featured activities for all ages to create a welcoming atmosphere and build new contact points between the museum and the local community, Roksana Filipowska, the head of education at the YCBA, said in a phone interview.

"Community Day celebrates the creativity of our community," YCBA Director Martina Droth wrote in an email to the news. "It's a pleasure and a privilege to co-create this day with our neighbors and city partners, sharing food, poetry, and storytelling."

The theme of the event this year was "The Places We Share" — a reference to the landscape exhibitions currently on display, including "John Constable: The Landscape Reimagine," and "Sightlines: British Landscape Photography, 1840 to Now."

Various activities highlighted local community collaborators. Meg Fama, a local chef at the Fair Haven restaurant Farm Belly, served food at the event. Tina Menchetti, an educator at Chapel Haven, led a clay activity, and author and West Haven native Abdul-Razak Zachariah '17 read his picture book.

According to Filipowska, the museum hopes that the activities create entry points for people to come and experience the museum in a new way. Filipowska added that the YCBA is in "a really exciting moment of transformation," and the museum is committing to becoming a "third place" for the New Haven community.

"In addition to the home, in addition to work or school, we're thinking about the Yale Center for British Art as a place where people gather with friends, with family, perhaps also as a place where folks can experience some individual reflection," Filipowska said.

EJ Crawford, the YCBA's chief communications officer, wrote in an email to the News that "Community Day" in its current form started in January 2023. However, the museum has hosted other events in the past under different names that were similar in nature, he added.

The day is centered around connecting people to the museum and the artwork on display. Filipowska added that many museums are working towards becoming more accessible. For the YCBA, she said, that effort involves thinking "very intentionally" not only about the Yale community but also about the greater New Haven community.

Menchetti said during her "Create with Clay" activity, she was excited to demonstrate to community members how natural materials are used to create art. She said her demonstration was inspired by Richard Long's site-specific installation at the center, in which the artist used gravity to paint with clay.

"Creating forms and impressing textures into the clay's surface, enables one to realize the endless possibilities of a material readily available in the earth to make art," Menchetti wrote in an email to the News before the event.

Filipowska said connecting the local community to the gallery was not necessarily the only focus of Saturday's event.

"I just want to emphasize that Community Day is about having fun," she said. "So we're really hoping to prioritize and foreground experiences that are hands-on, interactive, shared and fun."

The YCBA community day is hosted twice a year.



COURTESY OF HAROLD SHAPIRO
Hosted twice a year, the event connects the Yale Center for British Art to the members of the local community of all ages. This Sunday, the event featured catering from a local restaurant and readings of picture books by a West Haven native.

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