

Alison Larkin's 'Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy' kicks off Great Barrington Public Theater's Solo Fest

By Sharon Smullen, Eagle correspondent
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Alison Larkin's "Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy" kicks off Great Barrington Public Theater's Solo Fest on June 3.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY GREAT BARRINGTON PUBLIC THEATER

GREAT BARRINGTON — Berkshire resident Alison Larkin was in her 50s and an empty-nest single mother of two when she met Bhima, an accomplished area scientist combating climate change. Both had immigrated to America 30 years

ago, he from South India, she from England. They fell in love, and, for two years, planned a future together. Then, in 2020, he died.

Because Larkin is an internationally acclaimed actress, author, stand-up comedian and award-winning audiobook producer and narrator, she dealt with the tragedy the best way she knew how: she wrote a play about it. A one-person comedy, of course, with music by her longtime friend, Emmy-winning New York City composer Gary Schreiner.

In the process, Larkin turned the act of grieving on its head, creating an improbable funny work filled, not just with loss, but with joy, hope and redemption.

“Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy” will debut June 4 at Great Barrington Public Theater’s Solo Fest at Simon’s Rock’s Leibowitz Black Box Theater, with a reduced price preview on June 3. Larkin will perform, with Schreiner at the piano and Berkshire-based James Warwick directing.

This is Larkin’s second mostly-autobiographical solo show. Her first, “The English American,” chronicled an adopted English woman who finds her birth parents in the southern United States; it led to a bestselling book of the same name.

“When Bhima died,” said Larkin by phone following a rehearsal, “it was the pandemic, and I was not allowed to see anybody. And I thought, I know how to process impossible things through writing and comedy and song.”

At first, she thought, “what do I want to say to people?” Her response to herself was, “don’t waste time on anything that doesn’t matter.”



Alison Larkin rehearses a scene from “Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy” under the direction of James Warwick.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY GREAT BARRINGTON PUBLIC THEATER

“I’ve spent a lifetime avoiding love, probably for adoption-related reasons, a fear of trusting,” she explained. “In my 50s, I finally did it and really fell in love. And then I lost him. But instead of ending things for me, they’re just beginning. Now I know what it’s like, I would say to anybody, don’t be afraid of it.”

Larkin has a powerful guiding spirit in her corner: South African Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

“Many, many years ago I met [Tutu] and we got on extremely well and cracked each other up,” Larkin recalled. “He said to me, ‘I can’t control what happens to me, but I can control how I respond to it.’”

As she processed her grief, Larkin kept remembering Tutu's words, so she sent him a short email about what had happened. "I found a new joy," she concluded, "that I want to love and connect more, not less."

"He wrote back and said, I absolutely must tell the story because we need hope, and you've found a way to live more fully as a result of this loss. And I thought, maybe this will help other people."

"Tutu wanted me to do it now, he said we need this. Each day we get to choose how we will spend it."

Larkin told Tutu about the upcoming production. Shortly before he died in late 2021, at 90, "he wrote me an email and said, 'Alison, I have such a good feeling about this, I'm so proud of you.'"

There's so much in the story that's funny, she promised — including her experience of online dating in the Berkshires.

"Somebody said, if you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh first," she said. "There's lots of jokes, people will come out feeling better than when they went in. It's optimistic and hopeful."



Playwright and actor Alison Larkin with Bishop Desmond Tutu.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY ALISON LARKIN

The play is largely autobiographical, told with creative license.

“This is not a biopic,” she explained. “There isn’t a comedian alive who’s going to tell you things literally, but they will tell you the truth through the fiction. It’s much more fun and interesting to tell the emotional truth by changing some facts.”

None of us are alone, she added. “I’m hoping people will open up and talk and connect with each other. The value of connecting authentically and truthfully about things that matter cannot be underestimated.”

A solo show, Larkin explained, is actually a “huge team effort” with a director, lighting designers, stage managers, producers, and more.

“I’ve known Alison for 10 years, we’ve done eight audio books together,” Warwick said during a phone interview. “I knew why she was writing this and the important message she was trying to get across: how through grief you can find an unexpected future of joy and release and understanding. But you have to go through grief to get there. Because we know each other so well, I know how far she can go and stay objective about it.”

“It’s about a life that had hitherto been unfulfilled, and she had a cathartic two years in which all the rest of her life made a great deal more sense. That’s the point of the show, you never know what’s going to change your life. We’ve all had moments like that.”

With this play, Warwick believes, Larkin explores the two sides of the theater mask, both comedy and tragedy. “It never trivializes or condescends them,” he said. “I think Alison has written something quite profound, in a very idiosyncratic way.”

“Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy” opens Great Barrington Public Theater’s fully-staged 2022 summer season of four solo and two ensemble plays, among them a new work by Berkshire playwright Mark St. Germain, “Public Speaking 101.”

“The theme of Solo Fest is coming out of the pandemic,” Artistic Director Jim Frangione said during a phone interview. “Shows about humanity and compassion, stories of transformation, they’re all about overcoming obstacles.”

“A solo piece is an art form I’ve always enjoyed,” he added. “The bar is very high, because the performer, the writer, has to keep the balls in the air. Two of the plays [including Larkin’s] have music, a kind of pastiche of vaudeville and musical.”

“I cajoled Alison to write this for the past year, and I’m glad I did,” Frangione explained. “What’s come out of it is her story of renewal, a beautiful story of her life with the man she thought was going to be her husband, and his passing. It’s very cathartic for her to perform, very healing.”

“We’ve been friends for a long time, and have worked together on various projects over the years. She’s fearless, to get up there and do a solo play.”

An actor for 35 years in New York City and beyond, and Berkshire resident for two decades, Frangione was part of Berkshire Playwrights Lab for eight years. “We did readings at the Mahaiwe, [but] playwrights were clamoring for productions. And that was a clarion call for me.”

He founded Great Barrington Public Theater in 2019, with productions driven by local people. “The Berkshires has a really strong talent pool of actors, directors and writers,” he noted.

“There’s a real audience for new work and new plays, and we’re going to try to give it to them.”

Onstage

“Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy”

What: A solo play with music written and performed by Alison Larkin. Music by Gary Schreiner. Directed by James Warwick.

Where: Liebowitz Black Box Theater, Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, 84 Alford Road, Great Barrington

When: June 3-12, 7:30 p.m., June 3-5 and 9-11, 3 p.m., June 4-5 and 9-12

Tickets: \$25-\$45

More information and tickets: 413-528-0684, greatbarringtonpublictheater.org