

At large by Channing Gray: Our best wishes for rave reviews in the new year

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Some New Year's Day wishes for the arts:

Let's hope that Curt Columbus is the right fit for Trinity Rep. Columbus, who takes over this week as creative head of the theater, looks great on paper. He's been a valued member of the Chicago theater scene, a teacher, scholar, translator and director.

He's also been the number-two guy at Chicago's Steppenwolf, a theater with a lot of similarities to Trinity, including a resident acting troupe.

But Trinity is one of those places that's big on tradition and does not take change lightly. Rhode Islanders are very loyal when it comes to Trinity's company of actors and to the brand of theater that Trinity has developed over the years.

All one has to do is recall the short, stormy reign of Anne Bogart to understand that too much tinkering can spell disaster.

Yet there is room for change at Trinity, which as it has grown as a sizable institution has become a little soft around the edges. In an effort to fill seats, outgoing artistic director Oskar Eustis went with populist seasons that included the likes of Annie and Nickel and Dimed.

So Columbus has the ticklish task of keeping the theater fiscally sound, of raising millions each year, but also sharpening the artistic edge, doing plays that are a little more adventuresome than the current run of Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers, William S. Yellow Robe's quaint look at issues of mixed blood on a Montana Indian reservation.

Columbus has to think about shaking things up a bit, but without chasing away the fans. We wish him well.

Let's hope, too, that Perishable Theatre is able to put its troubles behind it in the coming year. Perishable, one of the few places around here where you can find cutting-edge theater, was dealt a blow this fall when artistic director Jason Nodler stepped down after only four months on the job, saying the company's finances weren't as stable as he was led to believe.

Whether or not that is true, the theater, which fills a valuable niche around here, has been left adrift as its board tries to put on a semblance of a season. Even the annual Women's Playwriting Festival, the thing Perishable is best known for, is in jeopardy. Good luck, Perishable.

Best wishes, too, to the Rhode Island Philharmonic, which is trying to dig itself out of a financial hole with some new programs and innovative marketing. Like a lot of orchestras in this country, the Philharmonic has been putting on a quality product but not making the money it should. In the last several years, it has lost about \$1 million.

But the orchestra has teamed up with the Providence Performing Arts Center for a new pops series starring some heavy hitters. The Beach Boys, who put on a holiday concert last month, drew about 2,500 people and actually earned the orchestra some money, said PPAC executive director Lynn Singleton.

"I suspect in the orchestra world, that's pretty unusual," said Singleton.

The Philharmonic also has a special benefit concert slated for March with acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Hopeful signs.

May '06 be your year

Best of luck to actor-writer-director Ricardo Pitts-Wiley in his new home in Pawtucket, at the Blackstone Valley Visitor Center. Pitts-Wiley, who has bounced about to a lot of venues, said he could no longer afford to put on theater in Providence and decided to move to Pawtucket. His first digs in Pawtucket didn't work out; he couldn't afford the rent there, either.

Perhaps now, in the Visitor Center, he will have a permanent site where he can build his Mixed Magic company.

Good luck also to Westerly's Colonial Theatre, which almost had to scrap its annual Shakespeare play in Wilcox Park last July because money was so tight.

The theater labors under the disadvantage of not being able to charge admission. Rules governing the park say events held there must be free (although donations are accepted). This year, it was only an eleventh-hour appeal to the community that made it possible for the company to do A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Hopefully, it will have an easier time of it next summer, and be able to line up sponsorship beforehand.

All the best to Opera Providence, which after a couple of seasons of regrouping, has put together a season once again -- albeit a low-budget one. I wasn't knocked out by their first effort, a Hansel and Gretel with piano accompaniment. But at least the company is headed in the right direction, putting on fully staged operas instead of fundraisers and free outdoor concerts. Next up are Puccini's Suor Angelica and Cavalleria Rusticana. Hopefully, those will be better.

After all, Opera Providence is the only show in town, now that the Rhode Island Philharmonic has stopped hosting touring opera.

And continued success to Pawtucket's Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, which has been putting on some of the most rewarding theater around. Ditto for Warren's 2nd Story Theatre, where you can catch a fine play upstairs and a tasty entrée down.

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