



Summer Dawn WALLACE

*Urbanite Theatre's
Co-Artistic Director*

This still new company, now in its third season in a theatre-rich two-county area, has blossomed into *THE* place to check out plays with topical and often controversial themes. Word has spread that it's a great theatre experience. Along with fellow Asolo Conservatory grad Brendan Ragan, they've won many admirers for their unique black box theatre experience located in the heart of downtown Sarasota.



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I met Summer Dawn Wallace, Urbanite Theatre's Co-Artistic Director, on a sweaty summer afternoon at the theatre when the Giving Challenge was less than a week away. One of many amazing facts about Urbanite starts to come to the fore. The goal this year was to raise at least \$45,000. They raised \$75,000 via 433 donors. In 24 hours. Fans and donors are passionate about the company. "A breath of fresh air" and "love them!" are some of the comments I read online.

So, already this new entity in a theatre-rich two-county area has blossomed (or is it exploded?) into THE place to check out plays with topical and often controversial themes. Word has spread that it's a great theatre experience.

Finding them is a case of being “hidden in plain sight.” Go to downtown Sarasota—Second Street to be precise—where the north side of Whole Foods sits. Cross the road to Kahwa Coffee, walk through the adjoining parking lot and there you are. Urbanite’s façade is mostly in deep shade thrown by a monstrosity of a building being built just west.

Summer Dawn is at the door to let me in and the “tour” is brief due to the fact the space is amazingly compact. She and her fellow Asolo Conservatory grad Brendan Ragan (Co-Artistic Director) take on various (non-acting) roles at the theatre. He’s a photographer, does the Theatre’s PR, social media and beautiful web site. Summer Dawn covers the door, handles ticketing and payroll and writes grants (I’m being very brief—they do a bit of everything).

But they both will direct and/or act on occasion, too. She directed this past summer's *Dry Land* while Brendan directed the show after that, *Breadcrumbs*. She's appeared in *Freak* and *Stupid Fucking Bird* and will also be in *Ideation* in January. Amanda LaForge is the company's Stage Manager and Volunteer Coordinator while Daniel Kelly is Director, Artistic Associate. Otherwise, for each production they bring in designers, directors and actors for each show.

A member of AEA and SAG-AFTRA, Summer Dawn's acting credits include Asolo Rep, Mad Cow Theatre, Broward Stage Door, Lagniappe Theatre, and Cumberland County Playhouse. And she has toured the country playing blue grass music. She earned her MFA in Acting from the FSU/Asolo Conservatory, class of 2012. As a teaching artist, Summer has worked with Manatee School for the Arts, IMG academy, Riverview High School, New College of Florida and Cumberland Co. Playhouse.

Her roots are in Tennessee where she “grew up on the stage” at a professional regional theatre. The experience was invaluable; she learned everything from being an actor to working in the scene shop and hanging lights—even doing laundry.

Urbanite is a black box theatre, meaning a stage unadorned with elaborate props, no proscenium, no wings and certainly no orchestra pit. Actors are on a small, but highly flexible space mostly surrounded by audience members who can probably read the time on the actors' watches—they're that close.

The theatre seats 55-70 people. There's often no intermission, the plays are shorter (usually around 90 minutes), there is no printed program book and there's no pitch for donations (though they certainly are welcome). They have a digital program book that is projected before the show and you can download it if you want. Oh, and no paper tickets either. The trees must be smiling as admission is all done digitally. But they do serve complimentary wine before the shows begin.


And then there's the content. We'll avoid the overused word "edgy" (besides it gives off a weird vibe), but since they opened in April of 2015, (when they launched a three-show summer season) content has been topical and quite fearless. Currently running is *My Barking Dog* (to December 18) by Eric Coble and directed by Daniel Kelly. The description reads: "Two reclusive apartment dwellers' unfulfilled lives take a turn for the bizarre when a hungry coyote begins to visit their fire escape. This brush with wildlife incites them to embrace their animal instincts as they bond with their untamed visitor."

Urbanite presented three shows when they launched in the summer of 2015. *Chicken Shop* by Anna Jordan had themes of bullying, growing up, being gay and human sexual slavery. It quickly put Urbanite on the map. Following that were *Reborn*, by Zayd Dohrn, a dark comedy, and *Isaac's Eye*, by Lucas Hnath that blended history and fantasy about Isaac Newton and his times.

They cast locally and also cast via video submission. They look for plays that typically cast 3-5 people. The show has to fit their budget and parameters. Since opening, in total they've produced nine full-length productions, a reading series, employed over 40 freelance artists, and housed two guest dance productions. Urbanite Theatre's current season has five regional premieres and runs through April 2017.

Sarasota/Bradenton is theatre rich—five prominent and established companies plus even more theatre via touring shows at the Van Wezel. So, again, how did they get it launched? Well, a man named Harry Lipstein, a Renaissance man of sorts who is also an actor (he was in Urbanite's *Stupid Fucking Bird*) and real estate investor (he's also called "founder" on Urbanite's web site), funded the location. Thus Urbanite not only has a kindred spirit on its board, but also doesn't have to worry about paying rent. "The stars aligned," she explains at having such a kindred spirit like Harry involved from the very beginning.

They recently launched the “Staying Power” fundraising campaign with a goal of raising \$350,000 by April 10, 2017, their second birthday. Summer Dawn’s goal is of course to grow Urbanite, but also “to pay folks more” as the theatre is run on a shoestring. Tickets are reasonable at \$28 and—I had to smile when I saw this—“Under 40 with Valid ID: \$20.” Students get in for only \$5.

In a statement seemingly designed for a twitter world she states, “We have high standards with small budget limitations.” But she quickly adds to that, “but they aren’t limitations at all.” 

About Urbanite Theatre

Currently running is *My Barking Dog* (to Dec. 18) by Eric Coble; directed by Daniel Kelly.

Urbanite Theatre, 1487 Second Street,
Sarasota. Visit Urbanitetheatre.com

STORY: Louise Bruderle

 IMAGES: Evelyn England

2017 Series

DECEMBER
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JANUARY
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NOVEMBER
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A large outdoor swimming pool with a blue tiled bottom and lane lines. In the background, there are colorful triangular flags strung across the top. A dolphin logo is visible on the left side of the pool. The text "MIRACLE SWIMMING" is prominently displayed in the center, with "MIRACLE" in a smaller font above "SWIMMING". Below the name, there is a registered trademark symbol. The text "Best-value adult classes in Sarasota, in Florida, in the U.S. Our system heals fear. Learn to be comfortable in deep water!" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this, the website "MiracleSwimming.org" and the phone number "941-921-6420" are listed. The pool has a set of stairs leading into the water on the right side.

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A woman with blonde hair, wearing a white halter top, looking up and smiling, with her hand raised near her head, against a blue sky background. The image is framed by a dark purple banner at the bottom with the text "Look and Feel Your Best" in a white, cursive font.

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