

The 2023 WOW Festival Hits High Notes at the Rady Shell

La Jolla Playhouse's annual Without Walls Festival offers theater and art at no cost this year.

by Makayla Hoppe

Since 2013, La Jolla Playhouse has offered new and imaginative performances outside traditional theater thanks to their Without Walls Festival. For the 2023 WOW Festival, the Playhouse has joined forces with the San Diego Symphony to put on an event that highlights the best of what both organizations bring to San Diego.

According to Festival Producer Amy Ashton, the Playhouse and the Symphony have had a creative relationship for years, and it is for this reason that the 2023 WOW Festival will take place at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park.

In 2020, Amy and other Playhouse staff were able to view the Rady Shell while it was still under construction.

"We went to go take a tour of this brand new site and as we were walking around, some of our colleagues were like, 'This is exactly the kind of space that we would love to use for WOW.' [We talked] to their team about the intentions of it being a public park and a really incredible place for San Diego...to be able to experience all sorts of different events and to open up that part of the waterfront to the city," she said.

This is the first time the WOW Festival has collaborated with another

San Diego institution of this magnitude. Previous years of the festival took place at Liberty Station and while Liberty Station is an art institution in its own right, it isn't quite the same. Amy explained that the partnership with the Symphony is significant because they are not just hosting the event, they are also contributing to it.

The Symphony's installation for the festival is an interactive one, something that the Playhouse enjoys bringing to each of its festivals.

"Instrumentalists will be playing along with an innate, originally-written piece by Ryan Carter, who has created a way for audiences to become a part of the ensemble with their cell phones. So there'll be live musicians stationed around the whole lawn and then audience members will be instructed and invited to participate in how that music gets made in a way that I am really, really excited to see happen," she said.

Bringing theater and other art installations outside has always been one of the big selling points of the festival. Not only does the WOW festival break away from the confines of a building, but it also brings in productions from outside the city.

Amy has found a wide range of theater for this year's lineup. "Just over half of the productions are from local groups, and then the other half is made up of national and international folks, which is pretty good for where we're at right now. I think we would like to have a little more international presence, but...it is not easy to get folks over here, as you can imagine," she said.

The Playhouse finds yearly performers by posting calls online and accepting proposals on its website. However, Amy and her colleagues do get to seek out productions with a more direct approach.

"Last summer, myself and one of my colleagues spent time in the Netherlands, France and England to meet some of the international groups that we've been hearing about or that we've been getting proposals from. [We wanted] to see how their festivals are run and glean new information because Europe has a stronger festival atmosphere than the United States does," she said.

WOW Festival 2023 will take place April 27–30, 2023 and the programming will have shows for guests of all ages. The beginning of the day includes family-friendly productions including



Top photo: "Birdmen." | Bottom: 2022 Festival.

interactive art and presentations specifically for kids. More adult-oriented art will begin to play as the day goes on and the sun sets.

La Jolla Playhouse's mission is to advance theater as an art form. With the event this year being free to guests, it is clear that the Playhouse wants to offer these opportunities as a gift to all of San Diego.

"I think we talk a lot about how the work that we do challenges the boundaries between artists, art and the audience. So that the audience's experience with the art is different than what you would get [from a ticketed show]—you know where you're going to sit, you're gonna clap at the end and the lights are gonna go down," she remarked.

"And for us, the ability to put that off-kilter...we never know what you're gonna get, or you never know what's going to turn into art or a performer, or if you're going to be able to interact with it or change how it's experienced. That is a really magical space to live in. And the festival gives us a chance to kind of create a playground for that." 

2023 Productions

"A SHARED SPACE" presented by the San Diego Symphony

Festival goers can use their cell phones as instruments and participate alongside Symphony musicians. Helmed by Ryan Carter, the interactive performance will take place across the entire lawn at the Shell.

"BIRDMEN" from Close-Act Theatre Company, The Netherlands

Puppeteers bring large, fantastical creatures to life. Illuminated, colorful and synchronized, the creatures react to the audience and their surroundings. Close-Act Theatre uses dance, music, fire and stilts in their street theater productions.

"CHOREO & FLY" by DISCO RIOT, San Diego, CA

This interactive dance performance uses kite flying to engage audiences with movement and to build a sense of community.

"CIRCULAR DIMENSIONS" by Christopher Cichocki

Featured at Coachella 2022, this audio and visual spectacular uses video projections of the natural world. The Coachella installation used 25,000 feet of PVC tubes as a canvas and the project can be adapted for many different venues or sites.

"DRIVE" from Diversionary Theater, San Diego, CA

Broadway veteran Sharon Wheatley tells her real-life story of a 2020 cross-country road trip with her wife and family. Featuring fellow "Come From Away" actress Astrid Van Wieren, the two women share Wheatley's story while stationed around a 30-foot RV.

"THE END" from Control Group Productions, Denver, CO

Audiences are shown a glimpse of a climate-fueled apocalypse from the inside of a renovated school bus.

"LAS CUATRO MILPAS" from TuYo Theatre, San Diego, CA

This piece is a 24' x 28' corn maze inspired by Las Cuatro Milpas, a Barrio Logan restaurant operating since 1933. The maze tells the story of a family traveling from Mexico to California. Participants can interact with the story by scanning QR codes and listening to audio tracks.

"THE NEST" by Megan Flød Johnson, St. Paul, MN

A hands-on, interactive exhibit for children that invites them to "explore the identity and home of an elusive and migrating Creature."

"SALTY WATER" from Blindspot Collective, San Diego, CA

A group of 15 professional performers and 40 local youth incorporate music, movement, puppetry, poetry and spoken word to tell stories of their connection to the sea.

"LA LUCHA" by David Israel Reynoso/ Optika Moderna

An immersive show inspired by lucha libre. Partnering with the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the Playhouse has brought back Optika Moderna for another WOW Festival. This production runs April 27–June 4 at MCASD's Joan and Irwin Jacobs Building. (This is the only paid event of the festival. Visit mcasd.org/events/la-lucha for ticket information.)

Visit WOWfestival.org for further information.