



LE PETIT
THEATRE
IS A
"SPECIAL PLACE"
FOR ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR
A. J. ALLEGRA

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

LE PETIT THEATRE

Le Petit Theatre holds “a special place” in A.J. Allegra’s heart. While working on a show there several years ago he met costume designer Kaci Thomassie. In 2020, they married.

Three years later the theatre became his employer.

As A.J. recalled in a recent interview, “I was presenting a show there for the Willow School where I was teaching at the time and Kaci and I worked together on it. That’s where it all started for us.”

Today, as the newly appointed artistic director of Le Petit, A.J. looks back on those fond memories while looking ahead to fulfilling a bucket list of goals he hopes to accomplish at the historic, century-old theatrical venue in the heart of the French Quarter.

He began his position as A.D. on August 1, 2023 after serving 16 years as artistic director of The NOLA Project, a theatrical group he founded in 2005 while still an undergraduate student at New York University. He and the other actors in the group staged performances in New Orleans during the summer months of that year and the following year, prior to A.J.’s move here in 2007.

Discussing his plans for Le Petit, A.J. said, “A major goal of mine is to ensure that the theater remains the very finest theater we have in New Orleans. I want to make sure we continue producing quality work that’s going to entertain, engage and also educate and challenge the audience.”

Although he came on board after the productions for the 2023-24 season had already been selected, A.J. said, “I think it was a nice selection. They’re all special in their own way, and so I’m very excited to be a producer on those shows and help choose the artistic and creative staff for them.”

Another of A.J.’s stated objectives includes restoring the theatre’s educational programming to the level it was prior to the pandemic and enhancing it in other creative ways. “Several good educational programs had to be paused and scuttled, so definitely one of my goals is to restart



A.J. and Kaci in New York City's Rockefeller Plaza

and grow all of those programs,” he said. He also oversees the theatre’s series of free matinees of mainstage productions for students in the Greater New Orleans Region.

While still heading up the NOLA Project, A.J. taught at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) for seven years and the Willow School for nine years. With educational experience under his belt, his sights are set on two major projects. They include Le Petit’s Young Conservatory program, which serves students ages 8-18 with skill-based theatre classes and workshops, and a Teen

Council activity program for students from 14 to 18 in which they undertake monthly projects, including acting classes and attending rehearsals of stage productions at Le Petit and other theaters in which they can interact with the actors.

“These are opportunities for kids of all age levels to develop some theatrical skills,” A.J. said. “I especially think that it’s a great opportunity for those who don’t have robust theatre arts training at their schools. A lot of schools don’t have the ability to give kids that type of in-depth training beyond just doing a school play.”

The teaching artists for the kids are

PHOTO COURTESY OF A.J. ALLEGRA

working theatrical professionals with multiple skill sets from all over the city, including A.J. in his role as coordinator of the youth programs.

Some of A.J.'s other goals include "putting more of a focus on commissioning plays, primarily from local writers, plus focusing on new work, staging world premieres and giving artists more opportunities to perform." In pursuit of that objective, he created a table-read series called Petit Read. The first group he assembled held a reading in late November of James Ijames' Pulitzer Prize-winning, modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's "Hamlet," titled "Fat Ham."

A.J. named Ijames and Jocelyn Bioh as two of his favorite contemporary playwrights. Dave Malloy and Stephen Sondheim are some of his favorite musical composers.

A.J.'s life journey began in the north-west Chicago suburb of Rolling Meadows, Illinois. He was named, at birth, Andrew Jon Allegra but, as he states, "I've been A.J. since birth. I have never once in my life been called Andrew by anyone in my family."

Like many other children his age, he performed in school productions and he cites, as his "crowning achievement" in high school, his role as the lead character in the Broadway musical "Little Me," written by Neil Simon. "I played seven

different characters with seven different costumes and seven different voices," A.J. said, explaining that each role was that of a woman's seven husbands.

From high school it was on to NYU School of the Arts where A.J. received his undergraduate degree in 2007, the same year he moved to New Orleans. Eleven years later he was awarded his Master's Degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

During his tenure at The NOLA Project, A.J. and the other members of the group performed dozens of productions in venues throughout the city and surrounding areas. Two of them were plays that A.J. wrote and many of the group's productions were sellouts. Especially popular was a series of annual productions of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that they performed in the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden adjacent to the New Orleans Museum of Art in City Park.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" would be A.J.'s final production with The NOLA Project when it was staged this past May. "It was kind of a nice way to start and end with my relationship with the museum," he said.

"I was very proud of my years with The NOLA Project," A.J. reminisced. "We did a tremendous amount of work. I hope that my leadership helped establish the



A.J. and Kaci enjoying a gondola ride in Venice, Italy

company become something more of an institution in the city, as opposed to being just a grass roots upstart. I made sure we got our 501(c)3 to become a nonprofit. I helped form the first board of directors and I oversaw the company through five different board presidents. And I formed the partnership with NOMA, for which I was also very proud."

And so as a new chapter opens in his creatively active life and career, A.J. is enjoying the support he is receiving at Le Petit from its Producing Executive Director Don-Scott Cooper and other members of the theatre staff. In addition to his multiple projects and responsibilities he is looking forward to directing Le Petit's season-ending production of Oscar Wilde's 1895 farcical comedy, "The Importance of Being Earnest."

He is also eagerly anticipating being involved in the selection process for next year's lineup of shows.

Summing up his recent appointment, A.J. said, "I am humbled and honored to have the opportunity to serve Le Petit Theatre as its artistic director. It is my goal to keep excellent and groundbreaking theatre and theatre education at the forefront of our mission while ensuring that Le Petit remains a vital part of our community's artistic identity for all New Orleanians."



A.J. and Kaci in Venice

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