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# Meet the Roustabouts

New theater troupe emphasizes local talent, new works and “fresh takes”

by David L. Coddon

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Photo by Torrey Bailey

*Phil Johnson, Will Cooper and Ruff Yeager*

Phil Johnson and Ruff Yeager have been down this road before, raising money and putting up their own to bring a shared dream to fruition. In 2015, just two

years after their genre-bending play *She-Rantulas From Outer Space in 3D* wowed audiences at Diversionary Theatre in University Heights, Johnson and Yeager marshaled the resources to take their baby to the prestigious off-center New York Fringe Festival in Manhattan, where, again, *She-Rantulas* was a critical hit.

Now, with the same brand of initiative and entrepreneurship, Johnson and Yeager are launching a new nonprofit San Diego theater company and calling themselves the Roustabouts. There's also a third Roustabout: playwright Will Cooper, who's based out of both Chicago and San Diego and whose piquant drama *Jade Heart* was a highlight of local Moxie Theatre's 2014 season.

"We're three pals making theater," says Johnson, sitting down with his co-founders recently in Diversionary Theatre's lobby. "We all have our own perspective. I think it'll make a delicious stew."

The Roustabouts, who will open their inaugural season on April 15 at Horton Plaza's Lyceum Theatre with the world premiere of Cooper's *Margin of Error*, are the latest in a growing number of ambitious new theater producers on the San Diego scene. The last three years alone have seen the arrival of New Fortune Theatre Company, Backyard Renaissance Theatre Company and the reboot of the bygone Sledgehammer Theatre. Like the others, the Roustabouts will, for now, operate without a permanent venue to call their own.

Following *Margin of Error*'s Lyceum run, the Roustabouts' summertime repertory pairing of Johnson's and Omri Schein's *Withering Heights* and Jane Wagner's one-woman show *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* will be staged at Diversionary.

While they might not have a theater home to call their own, the Roustabouts triumvirate say they're much more interested in being a home to San Diego's talented actors, directors, playwrights and designers.

"We're interested in nurturing local artists," says Yeager, a longtime playwright, director and actor in San Diego who will star in *Margin of Error*. "That's someplace where our community is lacking. There's still kind of a stigma about 'I'm from San Diego.' There are a lot of important voices here. We have valid things to say. San Diego theatre can be a bit insular. We can go beyond that. How can we affect the national conversation?"

The Roustabouts' mission is to produce new works as well as "fresh takes" on classics, Yeager says, but he added that there's more to it than that.

"It's not just new work, but work for artists in our community." *Margin of Error*'s production team, for example, will include director Rosina Reynolds, set designer Sean Fanning and sound designer Melanie Chen, all San Diego fixtures.

"We have a great theater scene here," says Johnson, who has been a popular figure on that scene for nearly 20 years. "We plan to look into local people, who are great."

Even with well-known artists such as Johnson and Yeager, along with the well-respected Cooper, at the helm, the launch of a new theater company in town is a bold and even risky proposition. Yet the trio is undaunted.

"Many playwrights would love to have a home and want to develop and present things," says Cooper. "I know that Phil and Ruff have the talent and

experience to make it work. So I jumped at the chance to be involved. I really came into this because we share a vision and we want to fulfill ourselves creatively. We're supporting each other and assuring each other's goals are met."

Yeager is mindful of the economics of the Roustabouts' undertaking. They all are. "By doing smaller plays," Yeager says, "like Phil's *Withering Heights*, we can afford to produce and to build writers' reputations."

As for attracting audiences this initial season, Johnson says, with a smile, "We have a nice circle of people who will come to almost anything we do."

The Roustabouts are confident that will be the case with the suspenseful drama *Margin of Error*.

"We had a reading of it at Moxie and I was totally wiped out by it," Johnson says. "I wanted it on stage right then. It packed a big fat wallop."

"It's going to be the kind of work we (the Roustabouts) do," adds Yeager. "It's intelligent. It's dynamic. It's theatrical. And it requires excellent actors, designers and a director. It sets a high bar for us."

All three Roustabouts are excited to have as the production's director Rosina Reynolds, who Cooper praises for having "just the right insight" into his play and who Johnson says "has such a grasp of the emotional—and she's an incredibly smart person."

"She's also very honest," Yeager chimes in. "New work needs honesty."

That honesty is something these three, all of them writers at heart, aim to inject into the Roustabouts' plays.

“For me, being a writer and an actor and a director has been such a gift in understanding storytelling,” Johnson says. “It’s always about communicating. I don’t think there’s anything better than what we do: understanding. I love understanding what makes people think.”

Yeager recalls his childhood in the Ozarks and how it influenced his creativity.

“I grew up around storytellers,” he says. “That’s how we used to spend Sunday afternoons after dinner. I would sit there in rapt attention listening to my great-grandfather ‘lie’ to us. They were fish stories.

“Now I’m at a point in my life where, as a writer, I’m ready step up to the plate and say some important things.”

Sounding humble about the weightiness of his work, Cooper says, “I don’t consider myself to have a particular ax to grind. I just want to tell good stories.”

Stories that endure, too.

“I look forward to the plays having a life beyond this,” says Johnson. “We want to provide new material that you’ll be hearing about, things that are provocative and well done. Watching each other come up with something and it becoming real is what’s exciting, and frightening, and fantastic.”

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