

The Berkshire Eagle

World premiere of Brad Fraser's 'Shelley's Shadow' is being produced at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill

Jeffrey Borak, The Berkshire Eagle

CATSKILL, N.Y. — Canadian playwright Brad Fraser had no trouble saying “yes” when he was asked by [Bridge Street Theatre](#) co-founders John Sowle and Steven Patterson to write a play for their 84-seat downtown Catskill, N.Y., theater.

Sowle and Patterson had no trouble approaching Fraser in the first place. It seemed only natural. Under the name Kaliyuga Arts, the twosome had produced one of Fraser’s plays, “Poor Super Man” in San Francisco in 1997, and two more, “True Love Lies” and “Kill Me Now,” in 2013 at Stageworks in Hudson, N.Y.

“Given the fact that they were among the most artistically and financially successful shows we’ve ever presented, approaching Brad about writing our first-ever commission seemed like a natural move,” Sowle said in an email.

As it happened, Fraser had been working on something off and on for the better part of a year.

“Brad had been posting to his many followers on Facebook about his adventures with an upstairs neighbor in Toronto, and he was mulling the possibility of turning his experiences with her into a play,” Sowle said.

“This lit a fire under me,” Fraser said by telephone from his home in Toronto.

The result, “Shelley’s Shadow,” begins a two-weekend world-premiere engagement running Sept. 8 through 18.

“Shelley’s Shadow” traces, over a number of years, the complex relationship among a struggling, out-of-work writer named David, who is approaching 60; his octogenarian upstairs lesbian neighbor, Shelley, who is showing every sign of onset Alzheimer’s-related dementia; and her idiosyncratic canine companion, Shadow.

Sowle is directing a cast that includes Patterson as David; Janet Keller as Shelley; and Daniel Hall Kuhn as Shelley’s dog, Shadow.

The production reunites Sowle and Patterson not only with Fraser but also with Keller, who appeared in “Poor Super Man” in San Francisco, and with Hall, who worked with Sowle and Patterson in their 2006 Off-Broadway production of Samuel Beckett’s “All That Fall” at the Cherry Lane Theatre and, more recently, in Bridge Street’s 2021 production of Samuel D. Hunter’s “Lewiston.”

“Shelley’s Shadow” treads a thin line between fiction and, Fraser said, “events from my actual life; how I process what happens in my life.”

He characterizes David as “my avatar, my doppelganger.” He likens his playwright's craft, his art, to that of a cartoonist — creating and defining a world and the people in that world through signifiers — “a reduction of life in a crystalline way (that) define(s) the essence of the story through narrative and then allow(s) everyone else to fill in the rest.”

In his mind's eye, Fraser sees Shelley's dog created onstage in any number of ways. Other than acknowledging that Shadow will be played by a human being, neither Fraser nor Sowle is giving away any clues to the stage magic that will allow that to happen.

“The dog can be done any number of ways,” Fraser said. “It's up to the director to figure that out. This is theater and we can transform any way we want it to be. It's important that we believe in the dog as much as any other character.”

Indeed, it is that “live magic” aspect of theater that attracts Fraser to writing for the stage.

“I've written for film and for television, where you can deal with all those special effects,” he said. “In theater, we're not relying on technology. Theater is live and mutable.”

Fraser has not been part of the rehearsal process. Indeed, he won't be arriving in Catskill until Thursday or Friday.

“I literally haven't heard the play read aloud,” he said. “For me a play is not a play until it is (spoken).”

“Shelley's Shadow” is the first play Bridge Street Theatre has commissioned since it opened its doors in April 2014. In all likelihood, it won't be the last.

“Coming out of COVID, we made a conscious decision to renew our theater's commitment to new works,” Sowle said.

It's an acknowledged risk.

“Drawing audiences to new work is always a challenge,” Sowle said, “but particularly now since many are still wary of returning to live performances. Adding to that difficulty is the fact that (while) Brad is quite famous in his native Canada, he is not well known here in the States.”

“There are few things in the world more exciting and terrifying than working on a play that's never been done before,” Patterson said in an email. “It's totally uncharted territory — no one else has ever had to solve this particular set of challenges.”

Onstage

What: “Shelley's Shadow” by Brad Fraser. Directed by John Sowle

Where: Bridge Street Theatre, 44 West Bridge St., Catskill, N.Y.

When: Sept. 8-18

Performances: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays

Tickets: \$22 (advance); \$25 (at the door); \$10 (students); pay-what-you-will (Sept. 8 and 11 – available at the door only)

Reservations and information: 518-943-3818; bridgest.org

Jeffrey Borak is The Eagle's theater critic.