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Call the newest boss of the Annenberg Center anything but conventional

A.D. Amorosi | @adamorosi Sep 22, 2017 Updated Sep 22, 2017



Christopher Gruits, the new head of the Annenberg Center wants to keep all the class that fine theater has to offer, but without all the stiffness. | Photo courtesy: upenn.edu

When the Annenberg Center's new programming chief Christopher A. Gruits got his opportunity to take over one of America's premiere outré performing arts halls, he did it with gusto.

Sure, he knew of its illustrious past and innovative bookings with the likes of John Zorn, Ravi Shankar, Cassandra Wilson, and Philip Glass to start, that which made the Annenberg and its esteemed longtime overseer Mike Rose adventurous and commercial name.

"I certainly knew that it had this great reputation, especially in music and dance," said Gruits as he preps for a busy first season that will include choreographing wunderkind Mark Morris as Annenberg's artist-in-residence. "Maybe I was less familiar with its history regarding innovative theatre and the role played in setting the bar for cutting edge work historically in Philly. I just really look forward to carrying on this great legacy."

Gruits kicks off overseeing the Fringe performance of "A Period of Animate Existence" by Pig Iron Theatre Company (Sept. 22-24), "Voice is the Original Instrument" by Joan La Barbara (Sept. 28) and a two-show-run with BalletX (Oct. 6-7). It's a handsome debut for a man who made Michigan's Interlochen Center for the Arts into a top-notch repository of bold living art.

“At Interlochen I believe I was able to bring an integrated approach to programming across different disciplines, organizing themes across art forms and bringing a real curatorial perspective to the campus,” Gruits said, mentioning the likes of Aaron Copland festivals, performances with Sarah Jarosz, Nico Muhly and Willie Nelson, and transforming Interlochen into a hub for artistic accomplishments.

Along with pushing for younger groovier audiences to attend his shows, Gruits wants to celebrate adventurous, top-tier presenter in town. “I recognize that because of our scale, we can welcome internationally based) while also cherry picking the best local talent in our dynamic arts environment are one of the more artistically excellent companies around. Creating a space for them in our making their Annenberg Center debut.”



“We’re definitely focusing on pulling some of the formality out of the Center,” says Gruits.” The Annenberg was built in the 1970’s at a time when cultural institutions thought differently about audience interaction. We want audiences to feel welcome here, whether they are from West Philadelphia, Center City, or Penn students, faculty, or staff.”

– Christopher Gruits, program chief of West Philly’s Annenberg Center

West Philly-born Christine Cox, the co-founding artistic & executive director of BalletX grew up not far from Annenberg and danced at the Center when she was with the Pennsylvania Ballet.

“It’s a privilege and an honor to have BalletX performing in that same theater,” said Cox. “Collaborating with the Annenberg too leads to building stronger relationships with this city’s invested arts leaders.”

If you want to discuss arts and its leaders, one has to mention Mark Morris, the now-61-year-old enfant terrible of the American dance world, who, as a choreographer and director has brought humor and scientific breadth to the movement form – an interesting notion considering University of Pennsylvania’s medical and scientific innovations. “Mark’s a singular artist; curious that he’s has not been in Philly for 14 years,” says Gruits of making Morris Annenberg’s artist-in-residence. “It’s obviously time to have him back.”

Gruits is also looking to redefine how classical and chamber music is heard within the halls of Annenberg looking to make the come-and-go approach like you have in other theaters, more of a norm at Annenberg.

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Ultimately, what Gruits wants for his new vision of an Annenberg Center has nothing to do with Michigan or New York City’s Carnegie Hall where he created youth-directed initiatives, but, rather an arts forum made for this city in this moment.

“I think most audiences just want an exceptional performance experience, period,” Gruits said. “ There might be a local slant depending on region – for instance, at Interlochen – there was a big audience for the country and folk genres, and we certainly want to work with artists that can tell stories of and about Philadelphia. We obviously have our own unique history and culture here. Ultimately, I think our job is to deliver a balanced season that features artists of exceptional quality. My view is that this remains the same wherever you are presenting the performing arts.”

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ALL OF AUTUMN’S A STAGE

One of the best parts of fall is the return of a new theater season, which is happening now throughout the city. With so much to choose from, wanted to provide a sampling of what’s expected on stage as the season’s change.

Cabaret

Berlin, Germany. 1929. The seedy sin house in question is called the Kit Kat Club. And our hero, American writer Cliff Bradshaw, has his eyes trained on nightclub performer Sally Bowles. But lo! Outside, Nazis threaten to ruin their decadent plans. This special cabaret, which commemorates the Arden's 30th anniversary, will feature much-loved Broadway scores and more. | Sept. 21-Oct. 22. \$15-52. Arden Theater. 40 N. 2nd St.

Blood Wedding

The Wilma Theater is bringing Nobel Prize-winning author and playwright Federico García Lorca to the Philly. "Blood Wedding," written in 1932, tells a universal story about a wedding day gone very wrong. In a remote Spanish village, we watch a young bride visited by a lover from a past life, sparking an explosive tribal feud between families. The Wilma's adaptation of the magical realist drama is led by Hungarian director-choreographer Csaba Horváth. | Oct. 25-Nov. 19. \$10-25. The Wilma Theater. 265 S. Broad St.

Wrestling Jerusalem

Aaron Davidman solo show, a whirlwind journey through Israeli-Palestinian conflict, does not offer easy answers. There is no glossing over. No generalities. No bullshit. The critically acclaimed one-man performance brings this authentic, soul-probing investigation to town by way of the Philadelphia Theater Company. | Oct. 18 - Nov. 5. \$19-\$25. Suzanne Roberts Theater. 480 S. Broad St.

The Color Purple

Granted, this isn't new; it's a revival of Tony Award-winning musical based on the classic Alice Walker novel. Come for the heart-crunching story about the American South — stay for the jazz, gospel, ragtime and blues. | Dec. 12-17. Tickets on sale later this year. The Forrest Theatre, 1114 Walnut St.

Red Velvet

A 19th century meta-drama set in London, "Red Velvet" opens to riots and protests that wouldn't be out of place on CNN today — except they're protesting the Slavery Abolition Act. Meanwhile, within the play, Ira Aldridge is about to become the first African American actor to play the role of Othello in a production of Shakespeare's classic drama. You can imagine what happens when the already angered white mob catches wind. | Sept. 13-Oct. 8. \$26-43. Lantern Theater Company, 923 Ludlow St.

– MAX MARIN | @MAXMMARIN

