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THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE



Weighing in on the pressure to be thin



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NOW PLAYING

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Michele Rafic in
A Year in the Life



'A Year in the Life of Twenty-Five Strangers Living in a City by the Lake'

If you've got a pile of admiration you haven't got a place for, consider placing it in the lap of director Shaun Colledge. He's helming *A Year in the Life of Twenty-Five Strangers Living in a City by the Lake*, a play by Matthew Fotis that traces a series of characters throughout a single year, one scene representing each month. Off-Off-Broadway's Ten Grand Productions is mounting the effort, and the group's take on casting the play is different, to say the least, from that of the playwright, who is the artistic and managing director of Chicago's Shantz Theatre.

Fotis's suggested casting, Colledge says, involves asking a cadre of actors to triple, quadruple, and even quintuple up on roles—and that's been the case for all prior productions of the play, at the Minnesota Fringe Festival, the Kansas City Fringe Festival, and other fringy venues. Despite his penchant for big titles (another Fotis play is called *The Candid Biography of a Single Chess Table Chosen at Random on an Ambiguous Spring Day in Central Park*), present-day theatre economics make small casts an absolute necessity.

But Ten Grand Productions abounds in actors, Colledge says. So when he was asked about a freelance gig directing the New York premiere of Fotis' play, it was suggested that he try to cast as many company actors as he felt possible. Indeed, would he consider casting 25 actors, one for each character? Colledge felt it would work, so off he went, trying to organize more than two dozen New York actors into one production. Half the actors are affiliated with Ten Grand; half were cast through a casting notice in Back Stage.

"*A Year in the Life* hasn't been a logistical nightmare, but scheduling conflicts do become a problem with this kind of thing," Colledge says. "I mean, you're staging four-to-six-minute snapshots out of the lives of these characters through the course of a year. Most of the scenes are duet

scenes, so it's been about the need to partner people up and then hoping all their schedules manage to sync up as well."

Smartly, though, Colledge has standardized his rehearsal process, ensuring that each pair of actors receives at least three rehearsals, beginning with a table read. "I'm a big believer in table work," he says, "as I have to make sure everyone understands the scenario and to talk about subtext that perhaps people aren't playing quite yet. In the second rehearsal, it's basically about blocking. And the third is normally just running it, running it, and running it, and finding out if there are any special nuggets we can—or should—be pulling out of the text."

A special challenge has been maintaining an overview of the play while simultaneously focusing on all the individual scenes. "Especially with a play that's structured this way, if you look at everything as individual scenes, the play won't work," Colledge says. "As the director, I have to see the whole thing. Now, of course the actors aren't seeing what all of the other actors are working on, so if you're not careful, it could come down to something looking more like an acting workshop than a cohesive story. I keep encouraging the actors to read through the play, to see where they're referenced in the scenes. Some actors do their homework more than others, but when you have 25 actors, you have a lot of different approaches to the work."

And that's why it's also important to be attuned to each actor's mindset. "It's always the trick of having the actor coming up with the idea—even if you had it two days ago," Colledge explains. "I actually had someone in rehearsal that had an epiphany two days ago. And I was like, 'Really?' But the thing is, you cannot ever tell an actor what to do. You have to make sure they're going on the journey with you."

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NOW PLAYING

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One clever idea of Colledge's is to have the actors, if they're not in a scene, participate in set changes—and since *A Year in the Life* occurs in 11 locations, there are a great deal of them to be done. "This is another of those plays where you've got a sparse set with few props, where it's all about what you can make out of chairs and a table," he says. "But I also thought, I don't think I want a crew. I want actors to be moving everything, so the audience gets to see everyone throughout the play, so they don't forget about this and that one." Typically, if you see two actors in a scene, you'll also see them later on engaged in a set change. The idea is that without pulling focus, the

essence of those actors' characters will be clearly visible as the set change proceeds.

You do whatever you must to engage actors in the backstory, to get them to believe in what they're doing, Colledge says. "It's an individual process for each actor. You have to figure out, do you cuss them out? Or do you hold them in your arms and pet them a little bit?"

***A Year in the Life of Twenty-Five Strangers Living in a City by the Lake* runs May 2–18 at the Algonquin Theater, 123 E. 24th St., NYC.
Tickets: (212) 868-4444 or
www.smarttix.com.**

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