



Marc Palmieri, who grew up in Melville. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

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ENTERTAINMENT **THEATER**

LI playwright's farce is a nod to Shakespeare

A Long Island landscaper attending a conference in Manhattan stumbles on a free performance of “Love’s Labour’s Lost.” The production is so low budget (Shakespeare in the Park it’s not) that the landscaper is called on to take part in the final scene, setting in motion the events of Marc Palmieri’s play “The Groundling.”

An unmistakable sense of reality envelops Palmieri's piece, which debuted in 2015 but is getting its first showing on Long Island Friday through Nov. 16, the second production from the new North Shore Village Theatre Company in Glenwood Landing.

In a broad sense, the play mirrors Palmieri's experience. Growing up in Melville, Palmieri, 48, graduated from Chaminade High School in Mineola and was well on his way to a professional baseball career. Drafted by the Toronto Blue Jays, he opted instead for an athletic scholarship to Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where he was making waves as a pitcher ("I majored in baseball," he jokes) when a required course — Intro to Theater — sent him in a different direction.

After seeing a campus production of "The Night of the Iguana," says Palmieri, "I was absolutely changed ... I had a new goal in life, which was to have something to do with this art form." He crammed enough courses into his final year to graduate with a theater minor, then came back to New York. There were some acting roles and a screenplay ("Telling You" with Jennifer Love Hewitt and Peter Facinelli, though he'd only reveal the name if I swore not to watch it).

But it was writing plays that really captured his interest. "The Groundling" is the second play in what Palmieri, who now lives in Bayside, calls his Long Island trilogy. The first, "Levittown," about a suburban family living in a home much like the one belonging to his grandparents, debuted in Manhattan in 2006. The latest, "To Every Season" (now being pitched around the country) is even more autobiographical, detailing the convergence of his careers: baseball (he coached at Chaminade for many years and still finds time to supervise a travel team), education (he teaches theater at Mercy College in Manhattan) and theater.

"The Groundling" has been done 10 times nationally, but this marks the first time Palmieri's play will get a full-scale production on his home turf. "We loved the fact that it was set on Long Island," says Christopher Moll, artistic director of North Shore Village Theatre, who's also playing landscaper Bob Malone. "We're surprised no one has done it before." But it was the crafting of the play that sealed the deal. "It's about connections," says director Steven Dahlke, "about how life turns on a dime."

Palmieri hinges the piece (the title comes from audience members who could only afford to stand on the ground in Shakespeare's day) on Bob's unexpected discovery of theater, which eventually leads him to write his own play and put it on in his garage for family and friends. The family-focused farce is lighthearted and comedic, and in a nod to the Bard, much of it is done in rhyme — Bob's response to the unfamiliar iambic pentameter. While Palmieri jests that it "gave me a chance to put my horrible poetry skills to use," it was also an opportunity to "take the audience further in the direction of comedy."

Important, because as with "Love's Labour's," there's a last-minute twist. No spoilers, but recall what Dahlke said about life turning on a dime. "It was something Shakespeare hadn't done before," says Palmieri, "a classic romantic comedy, and right at the end ... this darkness descends." It's fascinating, he says, to think about "what that was saying about life, how stories seem to be going one way, and without us knowing, are really going in another."