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Originally published July 28, 2007 at 12:00 AM | Page modified July 31, 2007 at 9:08 PM

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Larry Stone

Play ball? No, a play inspired by baseball

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Larry Stone
Seattle Times baseball reporter

For Mariners fans, the 2001 season will always elicit a swirl of disparate emotions.

There was jubilation as they rampaged through the American League en route to a record 116 wins and the division title. There was shock and sadness as they joined the rest of the country in mourning Sept. 11. And there was the anticlimactic letdown that came with their playoff ouster by the Yankees in the American League Championship Series.

To Martin Pierce, a rabid Mariners fan now immersed in the local theater scene as an actor, director and co-founder of the West of Brooklyn Theatre Company, it all seemed like perfect fodder for a play.

So he wrote it: "Lightning in a Bottle," which follows a group of Mariners fans (and non-fans who can't escape the Mariners mania) from opening day of 2001 through the last out of the ALCS.

The West of Brooklyn production, directed by Jeff Church and starring Pierce, Natalie Jones and Jaime Saginor, among others, will open Thursday at Theatre Off Jackson in Seattle, and runs through Aug. 18.

Set in a small Seattle neighborhood cafe and using the device of a radio announcer to frame the progress of the Mariners, the play chronicles the interaction of employees and customers through the season.

"It shows how people will bond over a sports team, and over a tragedy, like Sept. 11," Pierce said. "To me, it's a play about bonding. I really believe this is the kind of show a hard-core Mariner fan can go to and enjoy, remembering the little moments from the season."

There is a love affair between Pierce's character and a New York transplant in Seattle to attend college, leading to some fun Yankees-Mariners trash talking. There is also plenty of baseball banter, but a key to the plot is the transformation after Sept. 11, when winning suddenly became less important.



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JEFFREY WOLFF

"Lightning in a Bottle" stars, from left, David Kubiczky, Jaime Saginor, Martin Pierce, Chad Ian Russell (sitting on Justin Emerick's shoulders), Natalie Jones (hat) and Anne L. Hitt.

"Lightning in a Bottle"

Performances on Aug. 2-4, Aug. 9-11, and Aug. 16-18 at Theatre Off Jackson, 409 7th Avenue South, Seattle.

Ticket information, call 206-706-3716 or visit www.westofbklyn.com

Pierce experienced that phenomenon himself as he rooted for the Mariners in 2001 from Los Angeles, where he was pursuing his acting career.

"It really took the air out of the whole baseball thing for me," he said. "I wanted to hate the Yankees, but I couldn't. I really felt like something was taken away from me, and I really didn't care when they [Mariners] lost."

To director Church, the play is "really touching without being sappy" and "very, very much about Seattle."

Church's background is mainly in acting — he spent an extended stint in the local production of "Forever Plaid" — but was attracted to this play through a friend who was a cast member. Though admittedly not a rabid baseball fan, Church signed on to direct and hasn't regretted it.

"This ties in Martin's passion for baseball, and also his passion for the Seattle area," Church said. "I like working for that feel."

Church, manager for Tom Douglas Catering, has worked hard to authenticate the restaurant setting.

"I know what a cafe should look like," he said. "I don't want the actors to be standing behind a bar. I want them doing stuff — setting tables, looking like they're fixing eggs. I don't know if it will smell like a restaurant, but at least it will look like one."

Pierce was raised in Missoula, Mont., and attended the University of Montana before moving to Seattle in the mid-1980s. He tried his hand as a standup comic, doing a few open-mike nights and eventually moving to San Francisco, where he went so far as to study with a comedy coach.

The comedy coach suggested Pierce take an acting class, and when he did so, Pierce was hooked. He ditched comedy for acting and moved to New York to study the craft at the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts and the Neighborhood Playhouse with Richard Pinter.

Pierce then took off for L.A., but discovered quickly that the Hollywood scene was not for him. He said, in fact, that he hated it within a week of arriving.

"I did a couple of theater projects down there," Pierce said. "I would find people interested in it, but they would drop out in the middle because they got a toothpaste commercial or something, or a speaking part in 'Doogie Howser.' I was really frustrated."

Pierce returned to Seattle, where he found a thriving — and welcoming — fringe theater community. An art director in his "real job," he was a co-founder last year of the West of Brooklyn company, named after the preponderance of New York transfers in the group.

"I realized I'm probably not going to be a famous actor, but I still have a passion for this," he said. "So I'm going to pick the kind of plays I want to do. This combines everything — I love baseball, I love the Mariners, and I love theater. It was really fun to be able to combine all those things."

"Lightning in a Bottle" is the first play Pierce has authored, and he's been encouraged by the local buzz.

"I think we hit the right chord at the right time," he said. "There's just enough distance now from 2001 people can look back at it in retrospect."

Various local sports broadcasters have agreed to serve stints performing as the radio host, including Dave Mahler, Dave Grosby and Mike Gastineau of KJR, and Matt Pittman and Mark Aucutt of KOMO.

"It's nice to see the sports and theater communities — pretty important parts of this city — co-mingle a little bit," said Gastineau. "Everyone thinks of 1995 being the Hollywood story, and it is, but 2001 also had amazing elements."

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