

STAGE

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

“Single Room Occupancy” is a play with unique stories

By Joseph Dalton

There's a deceptively simple premise to “Single Room Occupancy,” a new play being performed Friday and Saturday nights at the Albany Barn. Three women share how it is that they've come to be living in an SRO, which is a form of low-income housing, usually just one step removed from a shelter.

“This is the story of their attempts to manage the economic insecurity in their lives and make plans for what kinds of future they're going to have,” says playwright Michael Kennedy.

All this may seem familiar — people down on their luck, trapped in poverty, doing what they can to avoid homelessness. Yet according to Kennedy, each individual has a unique story and each story points to larger forces in our society. As for the specifics of her three characters, one has mental health issues, another was forced out of her living situation because of rent increases and gentrification, and the third has a physical disability.

“Single Room Occupancy” was funded

in part by Breathing Lights. A vast art installation that's spread throughout the cities of Albany, Schenectady and Troy, Breathing Lights draws attention to the region's scourge of abandoned buildings by putting gently pulsing lights inside the windows of hundreds of empty houses.

According to Kennedy, there were more than 50 applicants to the Breathing Lights arts award program and her play was one of only eight winners. “Poverty, homelessness and neighborhood blight are issues at the heart of Breathing Lights,” she says.

Several vacant buildings lit as part of the project are located in the vicinity of the Albany Barn, the arts center where the play is being produced. An SRO is also located within the same Arbor Hill neighborhood.

Kennedy brings to the project substantial experience in both performing arts and social services. As a 30-year veteran of the local theater scene, she's been a performer and director and was on the faculty of the New York State Theater Institute at Sage College. She also holds degrees in human development and community psychology.

“I've worked in domestic violence and addiction programs and at connecting people with professional services,” she explains. “I also lived in an SRO very briefly as a young adult.”

“Single Room Occupancy” is the latest project of Creative Action Unlimited. The endeavor was launched two years ago by Kennedy as an outlet for her work in two arenas — theater related to social issues, and what she calls “inner mission mapping,” a form of counseling.

The script for “Single Room Occupancy” runs for about 40 minutes. After an intermission comes a session of playback theater, another specialty of Kennedy's. With Kennedy as facilitator, or “conductor,” audience members will be invited to share stories and experiences on the topic of “home.” These are then realized onstage in the form of short improvised scenes.

“Seeing this performance of ‘Single Room Occupancy’ may trigger people to think about their own story,” says Kennedy. “Then in the playback they'll have the opportunity to share those stories and also have them honored. My role is to create a

If you go

“Single Room Occupancy”

- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday
- **Where:** Albany Barn, 56 Second St., Albany
- **Tickets:** Admission is free. A goodwill donation is optional.

climate of safety and to warm up the audience to the topic and each other and the playback itself.”

The innovative format of the evening and the themes of poverty and homelessness may all seem a bit daunting. But Kennedy is foremost an artist.

“My first goal is a quality theatrical production,” she says. Raising awareness in the audience and encouraging them to take action are a secondary benefit.

“This is a 7:30 performance and you'll be walking at quarter to nine,” says Kennedy. “You should make dinner reservations because you'll have plenty to talk about.”

► Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.



Sarah Morand
Masha Burn as Amy and Michelle

Magnolia Ryan as Amy and Michelle
Smith-Carrigan as Andrea.