

# AMERICAN THEATRE

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

FEATURES | MAY 16, 2024

## Summers in Rhinebeck, Where Birds Sing and New Musicals Grow

*For 13 years, Kathy Evans's new-work development program in upstate New York has given writers what they need to make new musicals.*



By [Jim McDermott](#)

Last November in a sleek bar on a quiet street just off the push and buzz of Midtown Manhattan, Broadway actor-writers Adam Chanler-Berat and Beth Malone hosted an event to celebrate the new musical theatre work of nine writing teams. As benefactors and friends listened, Julia Lester, George Abud, Judy Kuhn, and others performed songs from musicals in development about everything from the border crisis and the memory care unit of an assisted living facility to the unexpected adventures of the oldest soul in the universe.

For more than a decade now, the [Rhinebeck Writers' Retreat](#) has been holding galas like this to fund the residencies it provides each summer for musical theatre writing teams. The idea for the program came to executive director Kathy Evans while she worked as executive director for the [National Alliance for Musical Theatre](#).

"There was such a strong need for writers to be able to focus solely on their writing," Evans said. One weekend while hiking along the Hudson in Rhinebeck, N.Y., where she lives, she said "the lightbulb went off. It's so beautiful up here and so close to New York City. This would be a perfect place for writers to get away."

Over the last 13 years the program that Evans created has quietly grown into an important resource for the development of new musicals, supporting dozens of creative teams at key moments in their artistic journeys and building a broader community of care and friendship amongst artists and their collaborators. At a moment when regional theatres and foundations are cutting funding, particularly for new-work development, Rhinebeck has become a beacon of just how much is still possible with limited resources. (Applications for the summer 2024 Rhinebeck Writers' Retreat are closed; this year's cohort of was [announced last month](#).)

## Creating a Creative Space

The heart of the Rhinebeck program is a week-long summer residency for musical theatre writing teams at a house two and half hours north of Penn Station in a beautiful part of upstate New York. After an application process that involves a submission of 25 pages of material and four songs, plus a one-page application, nine teams are chosen. Khyon Hursey, a 2019 fellow and ongoing submission reader, said he's been impressed by the range of projects that Rhinebeck has allowed for.

"Some are just ideas, and the ideas and one song or couple songs are so brilliant they deserve the space to explore," he said. "Then there'll be a full-fledged musical and they have very, very clear goals. The exciting thing about Kathy is that she allows the space for that."

From the start, Evans said, she saw the program as being about "empowering writers," giving them "agency and freedom." Translation: covering all their costs. "I was committed to making sure that we had the funds to pay for their whole residency," she said. The program currently reimburses up to \$1,000 dollars in travel expenses. When each team arrives for their week, Evans takes them shopping for groceries; said 2021 fellow Nygel Robinson, whose work *MEXODUS* with co-creator [Brian Quijada](#) had its world premiere at [Baltimore Center Stage](#) in March and is now running at [Mosaic Theater Company](#) in Washington, D.C. "She just swipes her card." That may sound like a small gesture, but many fellows note it. "We've done a bunch of residencies," noted 2019 fellow EllaRose Chary, "and I don't think we've had any that pay for groceries."



*Nygel Robinson and Brian Quijada at work on "MEXODUS" at Rhinebeck Writers' Retreat.*

Evans also insists on giving the writers a stipend; last year it was \$550. "Rhinebeck was the first time I had ever been paid to go away and write," said Kate Douglas, who has participated as a fellow twice. "It was a revolutionary concept to me." Brandon James Gwinn, who attended with Chary and director Sherri Eden Barber in 2019, points out the hidden cost of most residencies: "When you leave town, you can't work. So you're losing money." Added Barber, "I'm very thankful for my successes, and yet it is still very hard to pay bills." At Rhinebeck, by contrast, "What we were able to do, because we never had to worry about food, about how we were sleeping, about self-care—it was phenomenal."

The house itself is outfitted with resources specifically aimed at helping the teams, from notebooks and a white board to keyboards and an acoustic piano. "So many other residencies, even if they are just for theatre artists, are not specifically for musicals," explained [Adam Gwon](#), a three-time Rhinebeck fellow. "You can say, 'I need a keyboard,' then you show up and the keyboard doesn't have a music stand, doesn't have a pedal." At Rhinebeck, he says, they seem to think of everything, right down to Apple's ever-changing plugs, adapters, and cords. "It sounds silly, but it's so nice not to have to worry about these little details."

Sometimes those details have an outsized impact. "I work primarily in hip-hop, R&B, and rap, using digital instruments," Hursey explained. "At Rhinebeck, I started playing piano a little bit. Some of the songs I wrote on the piano are the ones that have been so instrumental in the show's life." That and writing lyrics longhand in notebooks for the first time not only helped the show, he said: "It was a deeply transformative experience for my process." And the rewrite that he did at Rhinebeck of his musical *Sean's Story* ended up leading to a commission from Ars Nova.

As Evans hoped, the location and its isolation have also proven to be a boon. "Being in the midst of trees and birds and hearing nature come awake in the morning, it's a very different experience than waking up in the middle of New York City," said Gwon. "I feel like I start to listen to the world in a different way. Different doors start to open." Said Kate Douglas of her two residencies, "Having this kind of uninterrupted peace to just make, make, make is so hard to find."

David Cumming, who came to Rhinebeck from the United Kingdom in 2019 with Zoe Roberts, Natasha Hodgson, and Felix Hagan, agreed. “We had literally just finished our first ever run of [Operation Mincemeat](#), and we had no idea what lay ahead,” he recalled. “Rhinebeck gave us a much-needed chance to shut out the world, focus back in as a collective and wrestle our unwieldy newborn into a stronger shape.” Their show opened at the Fortune Theatre on London’s West End in March 2023, recently won the Olivier Award for Best New Musical, and is still going strong.

## The Triple R

As the years have gone on, Rhinebeck has continued to innovate. Each team is now given a peer advisor with whom they talk before and during their residency. For his most recent project, *The Bozos*, Gwon noted the pivotal interactions he and his partner [Michael Mitnick](#) had with Rick Boynton, creative producer at [Chicago Shakespeare Theater](#).

“We were really early in the development of our show, so we had a lot of meat-and-potatoes questions” about things like their characters’ arcs, Gwon recalled. “Rick provided some really wonderful insight. All of the work we did that week came out of our initial conversation with him.”

As of last year the program also began offering a \$1,000 “Writers’ Choice” grant, which each team can use in any way they wish to help further the development of their musical. “You can hire actors for a reading; you can buy software that might help you make demos,” said Gwon. “I was really blown away by that.”

The most significant addition to the program came in 2015, when Rhinebeck started offering a second residency for one team of fellows, called the “Triple R.”

“We had a nice surplus the year before,” Evans remembered, “and when we asked the writers what else would you like to see, a lot of them talked about the next step.” In the Triple R program, one team which has already done the residency is given the resources to do a table reading of their work in New York, followed by a five-day residency in Rhinebeck to rewrite. Upon returning to New York, they get to do a 29-hour reading of their rewritten work.

“It’s such a huge confidence booster,” said Douglas, who participated in the Triple R in 2021 with her writing partner [Grace McLean](#) for their show *Against Women and Music!*, which would go on to be a 2022 finalist for the Eugene O’Neill residency. She particularly praised the “helix structure” of the Triple R, with readings at the start and finish. In a normal 29-hour reading, she said, “you can barely get the music taught, let alone changes made. That extra little buffer of time allows for an exponentially more creative process.”



*Kathy Evans*

Evans also pointed out that where the typical 29-hour reading is “a very intense process” focused on trying to sell your work, “we make it clear to the writers that this is about development. This is not a backers’ audition. This is for you.”

## ‘What Do You Need?’

Evans said that what she thinks makes Rhinebeck unique is that it gives its artists the space to be creative. “We give them the tools they need, and then we leave them alone.”

Fellows also point to Evans's tireless interest in them—how she never presumes to anticipate or understand fellows' specific needs without asking. Instead, she's an "active listener," Robinson said, in her conversations with fellows beforehand about how Rhinebeck can support them, as well as while they're there and when they leave. Many of the features the program has added over the years have come from the feedback she solicits from fellows.

Evans also employs a "Sounding Board" of theatrical professionals to whom she and Rhinebeck's board of directors can turn to for advice. "There's never a sense of 'But we've never done that' or 'That's not how we do things,'" said Playwrights Horizon associate artistic director [Natasha Sinha](#), who served on the Sounding Board and is now on Rhinebeck's board of directors. Sinha recalls one board meeting last year where the suggestion was made to provide basic recording equipment at the house to enable teams to make demos. "It was added within months," she said. "That just became a priority."



*Brandon James Gwinn and EllaRose Chary perform selections from "TL;DR: Thelma and Louise; Dyke Remix."*

"Once the decision's been made to support someone, Kathy really goes the distance," said Rick Farrar, who served on Rhinebeck's board for 11 years since its founding, the final three as chair.

Few teams have experienced that more profoundly than Gwinn, Chary, and Barber. Early in 2020, the three found out they had been chosen as Rhinebeck's 2020 Triple R recipients. Soon after, the pandemic shut the world down. "There would have been so many legitimate reasons for Kathy to be like, 'Okay, guys, I think we're just going to have to call it,'" said Chary. "We were really worried that if that did happen, it would be the end of our show."

Instead, Evans pushed the dates back, worked with Barber to figure out how they could do everything on Zoom, and asked the team, "What is the thing that you would still want?" Chary and Gwinn said they still wanted to go up to Rhinebeck to work for a week. Evans made it happen.

After the residency, days before they were to record the show, titled TL;DR: Thelma Louise; Dyke Remix, Gwinn was unexpectedly rushed to the hospital, where he learned that he would need emergency open heart surgery. While the recording went ahead, the group decided to put off the actual presentation until Gwinn was able to join them. As he recovered, Evans once again asked, "What do you need?" At his request, Rhinebeck provided the resources to pay a guitarist to record those parts, and gave Gwinn the months he needed to add all of the other instruments underneath the recording.

TL;DR went on to win the Richard Rodgers Award, and it is slated to have its world premiere this month at San Diego's [Diversionary Theatre](#). The team attributes their success to Evans: "It felt like [it happened] because Kathy had believed in us," said Chary. "She did not give up on us, and gave us the space to put our best work forward."

## Less Is More, Community Is Everything

Many fellows noted how Evans's investment in them has continued beyond the residency. "She's organizing events, writing grants, doing 11 things at once somehow, and still she has time to come support you on other projects," marveled Douglas. Robinson noted how much it has meant to him that she invited him to read submissions in the years after his fellowship. "She respects your level of artistry," he said. "Beyond you getting into the thing, she respects you as an observer of theatre."

“You apply for these things, you get the resources and you go to use them, and your show is almost always better for it,” noted Gwinn. “But then there are more artists behind you, they’re younger than you, and the organizations only have so much.” At Rhinebeck, by contrast, he said, “you’re kind of always a part of that family.” Gwon concurred: “Even the fact that the retreat is in Kathy’s hometown, it feels like she is both literally and metaphorically welcoming us into her home. There’s something really warm and lovely about that.”

Maybe the most surprising thing about Rhinebeck is that it does all of this on a budget of just \$160,000 a year, all which it raises from donations and grants. “We have a few foundations that have been loyal from almost the beginning,” Evans explained, naming the ASCAP Foundation and the Noël Coward Foundation. After a few years in existence Rhinebeck was able to start applying for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council of the Arts. This year they received a \$20,000 grant from the NEA, double what they received last year. Personal donations make a big difference, too. “Lots of individual donors are so generous, too,” Evans said. “A lot of them have been with us for years.”

For all its challenges, the need to ensure sufficient resources for the writers each year seems to have proven unexpectedly useful to the program. It has certainly nourished Rhinebeck’s drive to build a broad community of mutual affection and support, what Sinha describes as “a whole ecosystem that is generative for artists.”

Where other programs might have the temptation to over-extend, Evans and her board have consistently chosen to be cautious. “We’ve grown very judiciously,” Evans explained. Said Farrar: “Every decision has been made on the basis of what is going to serve the writers.” Having seen other programs try to do too much, Sinha praised that instinct. “Bigger isn’t always better when it comes to artistic support.”

As the aftermath of the pandemic lockdown has continued to impact theatre companies and foundations, funding for the development of new musicals has especially suffered. Just last summer, Gwon’s project *Alice Bliss*, which he developed at Rhinebeck in 2013 with Jenny Giering and Laura Harrington, was set to have its world premiere at [TheatreWorks Silicon Valley](#). Then the company ran out of money and canceled its entire season. “It’s a funny tension between the ‘community’ of musical theatre and the ‘industry,’” Gwon said. “I try to focus on the joy and the creativity that comes from the community. At the end of the day we don’t have so much control over the ups and downs of the industry.”

“Musicals need so many more resources and involve so many more collaborators,” Sinha noted. “It’s the first thing that gets dropped.” Rhinebeck shows how much is still possible, she said, with a clear mission and persistence of vision. “There’s no magic thing that’s happening here,” Sinha said. “Kathy knows what she wants to do, and that leads everything.”

The praise flows from all directions. In a typical comment, Douglas effused, “I can’t say enough superlatives about Kathy. She sees the future of musical theatre, and she is actively doing everything she can to support writers who are breaking convention in every sense. She is mighty.” For her part, Evans is reluctant to take much personal credit. “It’s very gratifying,” she said. “I often think about how lucky I am to meet these incredibly talented writers and to help them move their shows forward.”

She does acknowledge that this kind of support may be more crucial than ever for this fragile, precarious art form. “I think there is still some fear after COVID of trying new things or things that are out of the box,” she said. “I’m hoping that over time people will take more risks. There’s no shortage of musicals and ideas and talented people.”

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