

# Hangar Names New Artistic Director

By Olivia M. Hall

After a nationwide search, the Hangar Theatre has hired a new artistic director: Jen Waldman will take over the creative reins at the end of the summer season.

Waldman has made a name for herself in a variety of functions on and off Broadway and in regional theatres, having worked as a director, choreographer, actor, teacher and movement coach. Now based in New York City, where she trains professional actors at her studio, Waldman will soon begin commuting to Ithaca for several days each month to prepare the Hangar's next season. Come May, she plans to move her family to the Finger Lakes for the summer.

"It's just so fantastic that this is where I'm going to be spending so much time each year," Waldman says. "My ties to the region are very strong." Indeed, the new position marks a return to her former stomping grounds. It was during her years at Ithaca College, from which she graduated with a fine arts degree in 1997, that she first encountered the Hangar Theatre.

"I'm originally from L.A.," Waldman says. "When I went to the theater there, the productions were usually enormous, spectacular shows. But arriving in Ithaca as a freshman and seeing a show at the Hangar, I experienced for the first time feeling like part of a community of audience members. It really opened my eyes to the intimacy that theater can provide and how it can generate such goodwill within a community.



Photo provided

**Jen Waldman, a graduate of Ithaca College, returns to her old stomping grounds.**

"Plus, the Hangar gave us [students] something to strive for," she adds. "We felt that working there was a sign that you've really made it. So it's crazy ironic to me that all these years later I'm actually working at the Hangar, because I never was on stage there as a young actor."

Instead, Waldman's first job after graduation was as an ensemble member at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in Auburn. From there, she had the "outrageous but wonderful" opportunity to perform in a Broadway show.

"I was very lucky early in my professional career," she says. "While I was doing that show, I

developed an interest in direction and choreography, so I started dabbling a bit in those areas," she says. Waldman explains her further trajectory, saying, "I really loved the element of identifying and helping to empower potential for others to see. This led me to the idea of teaching."

She opened her studio the same week that she began rehearsals as an actor for "Wicked" on Broadway. After three-plus years of balancing both pursuits, she decided to step away from performing and direct and teach full time.

"My career on paper seems very varied, but to me it all feels like it's in complete alignment with each other," Waldman says. "My role as an educator is to enlighten people and engage them in active conversation, and I would say that my role as a director is to give actors the tools to do the same thing."

Now Waldman will apply these skills to the Hangar, where recent changes in leadership—including the departures of former artistic director Peter Flynn and executive director Lisa Bushlow—are ringing in a new era.

Waldman especially looks forward to renewing her collaboration with Josh Friedman, who was appointed the Hangar's managing director in 2012. "We've known each other for years and worked together at the Alley Theatre in Houston. He and I are like bread and butter. We're completely aligned about where we want the theater going and how to get there.

Not to sound too hippy-dippy, but I do feel like there was some greater plan for Josh and me to be working together," she says.

Friedman, for his part, shares Waldman's enthusiasm. "I admire Jen's passion and creativity, and I think her broad range of experience is going to be a tremendous asset to the Hangar," he says. "She and I complement each other in many ways, and I've been impressed with her ability to collaborate with her fellow artists."

The first task on Waldman's agenda is creating a "must-see season" for the theater's 40th anniversary. She is especially taken by the Hangar's three-quarter-round stage. "It really forces you to see the show from every possible angle, and the creative possibilities are limitless," she says. "It has the potential to be used year-round, once we're able to establish an infrastructure that can support that financially."

Thus, fundraising, reconnecting with alumni from the theater's many educational programs and strengthening ties with community partners are additional priorities for Waldman. "Nonprofits in particular tend to suffer during economic downturns such as this," she explains. "But the great thing about the theater is that if you had to, you could do it with a cardboard box and a stool. But we have great potential to grow the organization, and we're certainly excited to get the community more involved in helping us figure out how we can better serve them."

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