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THEATER REVIEW

## REVIEW: Alison Larkin's 'Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy' is a life-affirming show about love and loss

By Jeffrey Borak, The Berkshire Eagle  
Jun 9, 2022



Alison Larkin stars in her new solo show, "Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy."

PHOTO PROVIDED BY GREAT BARRINGTON PUBLIC THEATER

GREAT BARRINGTON — Three words in the title of Alison Larkin's life-affirming new solo show — grief, musical, comedy — sum it all up. In so many ways, this is a show about the contradictions of life; how we rebound at a time of great loss, and how best to honor a deep and profound love shared by two people over time when death separates them.

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### **Theater review**

**What:** "Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy," Written and performed by Alison Larkin. Original music by Gary Schreiner. Directed by James Warwick.

**Who:** Great Barrington Public Theater

**Where:** Liebowitz Black Box Theater, Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Road, Great Barrington

**When:** Through June 12

**Performances:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday; 3 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

**Running time:** 1 hour, 20 minutes (no intermission)

**Tickets:** \$25-\$45

**Reservations and information:** 413-528-0684; [greatbarringtonpublictheater.org](http://greatbarringtonpublictheater.org)

**COVID policy:** Proof of vaccination is required. Masks must be worn at all times in the Daniel Arts Center

“Grief, the Musical ... a Comedy” is the opening show in Great Barrington Public Theater’s Solo Festival. It’s a bright bauble of a piece, even when — maybe especially when — death, in the form of COVID-19, deals a blow. To be sure, Larkin does not take death lightly. But the meaning she finds in death, the perspective death throws on a life well-lived and a love well-shared is eye-opening and life-affirming.

Adopted by a British couple, Larkin, an internationally successful actor, writer, stand-up comic, voice artist, best-selling novelist and award-winning audiobook producer and narrator, came to the United States in 1984 when she was 21 in search of her American birth mother. After a reunion in Tennessee, Larkin moved to New York and began a career as a stand-up comic.

All of that, in somewhat digest form, serves as prologue to the real story at hand in “Grief ...,” Larkin’s discovery of true love in her 50s.

Larkin came to the Berkshires in 2010 and settled in Stockbridge from where this empty-nest single mother of two runs an accomplished, award-winning audiobook company, Alison Larkin Presents. Ready to take the plunge into the dating world, Larkin made a few futile attempts via online dating. The universe, however, had something else in mind for Larkin, who met her “One” purely by chance on a wintry Sunday morning in February 2011 — Feb. 3, she recalls — at The Red Lion Inn, the only place in town at the time, Larkin says, that sold the Sunday New York Times, which particularly appealed to her because of the crossword puzzle. She recalls walking up to the main desk in the inn’s lobby, asking to purchase a copy of the Sunday Times only to be told that the last copy had been bought by a gentleman who was standing hereby, also, it turned out, a Sunday Times crossword enthusiast. And so began a daylong introduction, conversation, dinner and eventually a decade-long relationship between Larkin and Bhima, a scientist who turned away from corporate America to work on developing a renewable energy project in Vermont.

Larkin recalls bringing Bhima to meet her adopted parents in England; she meets his family. She marvels at Bhima's healthy outlook on life; how he takes care of an immunocompromised body; the time they spent traveling; Larkin learning to see the world around her in fresh ways. "I began to see the natural world through his eyes," she says. At times, he hears the natural world through her voice as she recreates his with such skill that he lightly suggests at one point that should she quote him in any conversations with others that she use his voice. Indeed, at one point in "Grief ...," Larkin and Bhima sing a duet, although as masterly as she is as a voice artist, she hasn't yet perfected the art of two separate voices singing together at the same time. She does, however, create an endearing moment as the two share a song, singing to one another and us.

Larkin recalls Bhima turning to her at one point in 2020 and suggesting that, finally, they will marry in two year's time after they first accomplish some things he needs to do with regard to his Vermont renewable energy project. COVID, however, intervenes. Larkin recounts Bhima's rapid death from a sudden onset of COVID; the separation between them; the rapid progress of his condition; then death and her isolation afterward. "There are more than five stages of grief," she says, referring to Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as part of the process of learning to live with the loss of a loved one.

Rather than hide under a bed and retreat, Larkin, buoyed by the lessons of her life with Bhima and the profound love they shared, turned to what she knows best – writing and performing, (here with the aid of some songs written with Gary Schreiner, who is her onstage accompanist). She and we are the better for it.

Clearly, Larkin loves being on a stage. The intimacy of the Liebowitz Black Box Theatre at Bard College at Simon's Rock's Daniel Arts Center is a perfect fit. Director James Warwick has a shrewd sense of how to make the space and Larkin's skills work to her advantage.

There is such a Puckish quality to Larkin's onstage persona; the hint of an imp, especially when, as happened on two occasions during the weekend's opening performance, she forgot her lines and wasn't embarrassed to let us know. "The lovely thing about forgetting your lines in something you write," Larkin said with a hint of devilish glee, "is that you can say anything and the audience will think it's what you wrote."

There are times in her narrative about Bhima's death and its rapid onset, her inability, because of circumstances, to be with him in his final moments, that are painfully understandable for those who have endured similar situations. But, two years after Bhima's death, Larkin seems to have emerged from her mourning whole and fresh. She still is seeing the natural world through Bhima's eyes ... and so, thanks to Larkin's consummate skill and generosity, do we.

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Jeffrey Borak is The Eagle's theater critic.

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