

A Definition of Refuge

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
February 2020

Miami Motel Stories brings the past to North Beach



nce again Juggerknot Theatre Company and Miami playwright Juan C. Sanchez coax true Miami experiences to life through immersive theater -- this time with *Miami Motel Stories North Beach*. Fifty artists, including 27 actors and directors Ana Margineanu and Tai Thompson, have gathered to weave the tapestry of the 24-block neighborhood over the past century.

You'll meet the Southern church lady appalled at the goings-on at the Jungle Inn speakeasy with the bootleg hooch and gambling; the 1960s mobster preparing for his next rubout; Harold and Marion, the 1956 Jewish honeymooners from Brooklyn; Mary, the 1960s domestic servant at Normandy Isle required to wear an ID while on the beach; the young black and Jewish high-schoolers thrown together by busing in 1972; the Argentine couple getting their bearings in 1991; the squatters in the deserted building in 2015; and an actor inspired by "Shoe Doctor" Dinsdale Gibbs, who is 81 and still cobbles every day at 7416 Collins Ave.

You might even find yourself with Andrew Cunanan, the serial killer who murdered Gianni Versace in 1997, seeking refuge on Pine Tree Drive before decamping to a houseboat and shooting himself in the head with a stolen pistol.

In developing the experience, Sanchez found his key overarching word and loose theme: refuge.

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“Back in 1875, there was only one structure built here,” Sanchez says. “It was the two-story Biscayne House of Refuge, one of five lifesaving stations ordered by President Ulysses Grant in South Florida. That information set the course for an interesting journey and created an overarching theme. This neighborhood has always been a place of refuge.”



The refuge marker stands at Collins and 72nd Street, just south of the North Beach Bandshell. Captain William Fulford became keeper of the house before staking out some land that became North Miami Beach.

In creating his stories, Sanchez says he has tried to be scrupulous with the neighborhood’s history, working in concert with HistoryMiami and historian Paul George, who has led tours of the North Beach neighborhood that extends into nearby LaGorce and Normandy Isle.

Miami Motel Stories North Beach, presented by Perrier in partnership with Ocean Terrace Holdings, runs February 6-29, Thursday to Sunday, 7:30 and 9:30 p.m. at the Broadmoor Hotel, 7450 Ocean Terr. in Miami Beach. You can choose from four storylines by selecting blue, orange, yellow, and pink room keys.

The Juggerknot team works closely to set the mood for each room, as Annamarie Morales

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handles the lighting, Li Milian the sets, and Lee Harrison the costumes. The colors and design carry significance: blue for crime, orange for outside, yellow for home, and pink for glamour. Tangled branches over a bed, say, may connote the trapped mind of a lawyer traumatized by a beating.

Tickets are \$69.99 through MiamiMotelStories.com. Meet at the hotel. Wear comfortable shoes, and don't bring bulky items. Disabilities are accommodated, and you must be 18. Free parking is available after 6:30 p.m. along the streets and in public lots nearby.

This production, the fourth in a series, follows *Miami Motel Stories Little Havana* in 2017, *Miami Motel Stories MiMo* in 2018, and *Wynwood Stories* last year.



An aside: For real Miami Beach oral history in book form, treat yourself to Joann Biondi's 2007 labor of love, *Miami Beach Memories: A Nostalgic Chronicle of Days Gone By*. It is a wonder, and many of her voices have since passed on.

On another level, these productions pay tribute to the past and portend what is to come -- for a big wave is about to land.

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Ocean Terrace Holdings, led by developers Sandor Scher and Alex Blavatnik, bought up the 7400 block between Collins and Ocean Terrace, and are preparing to build a \$220 million beachfront mixed-use development, with a 235-foot-tall residential tower and 125-foot-tall hotel. They will create a midblock public pass-through from Collins to the ocean, and retain about 12 midcentury modern façades from the early 1950s.

In a development agreement passed unanimously by the Miami Beach City Commission last summer, Ocean Terrace agreed to invest \$15 million in a public oceanfront park designed by landscape architect Raymond Jungles. Construction will take about three years.

Ocean Terrace provided the space for Juggerknot and accommodated the group. In a news release, Scher said he and Blavatnik are “looking to the past to inspire our future development plans on the block” and, in providing the venue, are “underscoring our commitment to promoting the arts.”

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