

Seattle theater artist Jay Woods brings her influence to the 5th Ave | The Seattle Times

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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For an art form that concerns itself with the human condition, theater is not always so concerned about the humans who make it. During the racial reckoning that began in 2020, one local artist became a prime mover in forming [Seattle Theatre Leaders](#), a coalition of local professionals working to address institutional racism in the industry. Now she will have the opportunity to guide one of Seattle's largest theater companies in working toward some of the ideas sparked by Seattle Theatre Leaders.

At the beginning of March, Jay Woods will become the associate artistic director of artist engagement at the 5th Avenue Theatre. The role focuses on the artists involved in 5th Avenue productions, but audiences will feel her influence even before she starts the job. Woods is directing Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," the first in-person production at the 5th Avenue since the pandemic began. Originally scheduled to run Jan. 12-Feb. 6, the show's actual opening date was in flux as of press time, due to a recent pause on rehearsals because of COVID-19 precautions.

"What really excited me was the way Jay talks about what theater can be and how we can tell stories differently than we have in the past," said Bill Berry, the 5th Avenue's producing artistic director. "The care and passion she has for creating process that allows space for every artist to be



Jay Woods, right, watches as the actors run through a scene from “Beauty and the Beast” during rehearsals on Dec. 17, 2021. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

Woods is currently co-artistic director of Sound Theatre Company with company founder Teresa Thuman. Since 2006, Sound Theatre has [showcased emerging artists](#), and since 2015 has operated with an express mission of social justice and equity.

humans first. How are they best able to step into a brave space where choices can be expressed without judgment?," says Woods.

Thuman says creating that space is Woods' strength. "She is

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Mattioli gave Woods free reign to explore every aspect of theater, and Woods became fascinated by how it all fit together.

“From basically 14 or 15, I have known that I would be a director and artistic director of a major institution and I have never let my foot off the gas,” she said.





By graduation, she was facing a challenge.

At the beginning of March, Jay Woods will become the associate artistic director of artist engagement at the 5th Avenue Theatre. (Courtesy of Jay Woods)

She told herself, "If you think that you are a shark in this

pond, then you need to find the really old sharks with scars and missing teeth. They will be able to teach you a thing or two."

After a semester in Thailand, she moved to Seattle in 2016

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through [Seattle Theatre Leaders](#). When the pandemic shut down theaters in March 2020, she thought the pause seemed like a perfect opportunity.

“We’re all Seattle-based theater colleagues. We ought to have a staff meeting and have a conversation about coronavirus, and about all of the practices which are steeped in white supremacy, which are steeped in systemic racism, which are termites within our theater building, as it were. When we’re allowed to come back, we ought to come back

Woods to cancel a series of STL town halls. Until those events can be rescheduled, participants continue to share ideas in their STL accountability groups and work for change within their own organizations.

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