

Theater in the Raw: ReadFest Brings the hottest new theater to Houston — and it's free

This year, Houston's theater scene is going through unprecedented growth with new performing arts venues like the The Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston ([The MATCH](#)) opening, old favorite theater companies renovating, and new companies being created.

One of those cool newbies on the block, [Next Iteration Theater Company](#), founded a year ago by theater director and visual artist [Dianne K. Webb](#) and writer and business consultant [Tayyba Maya Kanwal](#), has taken it upon itself to give a very unusual theatrical gift to the city, an absolutely free, three-day play reading festival.

With six plays, six theater companies, three nights and one venue, [ReadFest](#) will allow audiences to experience intriguing new and new-to-Houston theatrical works while maybe also giving them an introduction to some of the smaller and most innovative theater companies in town.

From Thursday, October 22 to Saturday the 24th, the six companies: Next Iteration Theater Company, [Landing Theatre Company](#), [Ensemble Theatre](#), [Black Lab Theatre](#), [Wordsmyth Theater](#) and [Hune Company](#), will take over two stages at the MATCH and show Houston how powerful a play reading can be.

Take a chance

While some readings can get elaborate, most are theater at its most raw and concentrated, a performance with only the most basic ingredients of theater: play, director and actors. There are several reasons a theater company might want to try out a play first with a reading performance, but foremost it gives a company the opportunity to take a chance and try out that new, strange or quirky play and see if it's ready for Houston and if Houston is ready for it.

"Readings allows you to play, to test waters, and they're also a very gentle and intriguing way to expose audiences to new ideas in theater," explains Next Iteration's artistic director, Dianne K. Webb.

This is one of the reasons Webb wanted to create ReadFest for Houston — she thinks the city is ripe for more great theater and more experiments in ways to bring audiences and theatrical artists together.

"There's an energy happening here, and we're starting to get the momentum of a large city," Webb believes. "A large city should be a cultural center. It should be a place that fosters and feeds new ideas, new talents, new companies and I think Houston is just figuring that out. I think it's ripe. I think it's amazing and open. The more the merrier. The more we do, the more we invite, the more we get here, the more theater there's going to be."

First big initiative

Webb and Next Iteration are certainly not taking an easy route for the company's first big initiative. Why not just mount their own production? Why attempt to bring in many companies to work together?

"I'm a grassroots organizer at heart," explains Webb. "It dawned on me that there are a lot of companies here who could benefit from seeing what the MATCH had to offer. The MATCH would benefit from us getting in the building and seeing what they had to offer. And we would benefit by being the means for that to happen."

Community and collaboration are the core of ReadFest and what Next Iteration is attempting to accomplish for such a young company.

"One thing Tayyba and I really want to do is promote everybody," Webb says of all the companies participating in ReadFest. "I really believe there's enough to go around. And I believe our diversity, our special interests, our way of doing things is absolutely crucial, that every one of us is needed. We are not in competition. We are just creating a larger need and desire for theater."

Diverse spectrum

For ReadFest, each company was responsible for picking their own play, director and cast. Some of the plays, like Black Lab Theatre's *Beth Kills Birds*, are in development, while others will be very new to Houston. Next Iteration's choice is *Time is the Mercy of Eternity: A Meditation in Four Acts* by Deb Margolin a work written in 2008 but which has only been produced a few times. Webb says she picked *Time is the Mercy* because it's "clean and lovely" without "a wasted word."

But wait there's more than just a free chance to see some amazing new theater at The MATCH, a venue that is shaping up to be the one-stop space for a wide range of eclectic performing arts. Many of the performances will have talk back sessions with the actors, and a few of the playwrights themselves might be on hand.

With a Friday night reception, refreshments in the MATCH breezeway between shows on Saturday and to-be-announced after parties at various Midtown bars, ReadFest might also turn out to be the theatrical social event of the fall.

This too is a hope of the Next Iteration Theater Company. Webb feels there need to be known places for audience members and performing artists to gather after the many shows around downtown to talk about the event and keep the play-going experience going on into the night. So why not some of the bars, pubs or restaurants in Midtown?

"The MATCH is well placed for such proximity to have that," says Webb. "We want to encourage that. We want to start a new fad: Go here for drinks after your show. This is where the post show people hang out."

Check out the ReadFest schedule and get your [free tickets](#) early before they're all gone.

Thursday, October 22: Black Lab Theatre presents *Beth Kills Birds* by Jordan Jaffe at 8 pm.

Friday, October 23: Hune Company presents *Exit Strategy* by Ike Holter at 7 pm and Landing Theatre Company presents *Daughters of the Moon* by Reginald Edmunds at 8 pm.

Saturday, October 24: Wordsmyth Theater Company presents *Dreams/ D-E-F-E-R-R-E-D* by Mihály Magz at 5 pm; The Ensemble Theatre presents *Front Porch Society* by Melda Beaty at 7 pm and Next Iteration Theater Company presents *Time is the Mercy of Eternity: A Meditation in Four Acts* by Deb Margolin at 8 pm.