



Photo by James Turner



WATERFIRE PROVIDENCE

Elemental Alchemy

By Laurencia Ciprus

Dusk approaches at the finale of summer. Tonight, three rivers – once fouled and abandoned – now converge and comele into the basin shining evanescent under a pregnant moon and confetti of stars. On other nights, in early spring or late fall, there might be colonizing clouds streaked with rain or snow with frigid winds out of the Northeast. The light shifts quickly and sunset nudges a few minutes closer to winter. Thus begins the prelude to a full lighting at WaterFire, Providence.

The gathering crowd is everyman and everywoman. There are serene locals and boisterous tourists, warm families with enraptured children, ardent lovers, and silent mourners counting their memories and blessings. They're drawn together by the primeval fires as a random family for one night in an unspoken agreement. Young and old, wealthy or modest, local or with global roots, they'll arrive alone, coupled, or in loose clans to participate in something much larger than themselves. Intuitively they reach down into an ancient place within a shared universe of DNA.

The evening deepens. Tides along the rivers rise and fall. Seemingly out of nowhere music materializes, waxes, and wanes. Each of these nights is meticulously scored with an array of music arranged to implore, soothe, and inspire free flowing emotion. The air is punctuated with the primeval sound of echoing gongs and the

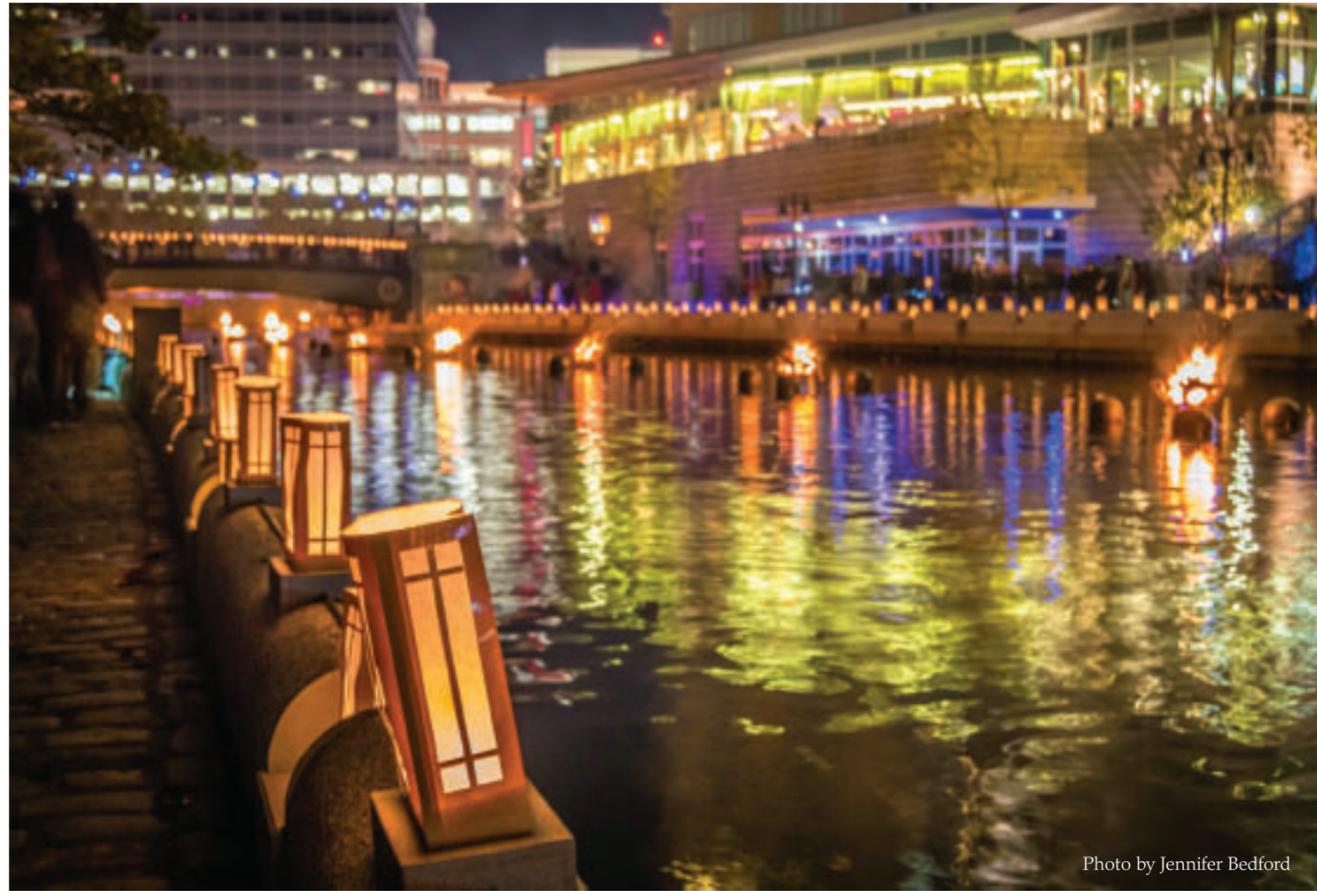


Photo by Jennifer Bedford

crackling ignition of 100 pine filled braziers. Dark clad torchbearers stoke the fires from a flotilla of crafts named after ancient gods; and they all equal in purpose and status, regardless of background, as participants in this play. The last scrap of the everyday world is handed off to the mystic, and a collective suspension of disbelief – shared by over 50,000 – takes hold as this interpretation of commedia dell'arte begins. As the braziers advance to full light and the air fills with the fragrance of dried pine, there is quiet reverence as the spirit is given over to magic. Once the fires are established, the masses begin to move along the candlelit tunnels and cobbled walkways without prompting. The movement mirrors the ancient quality of traditional evening passeggiatas – leisurely strolls – along the rivers and plazas of Italy.



Photo by Tom Lincoln

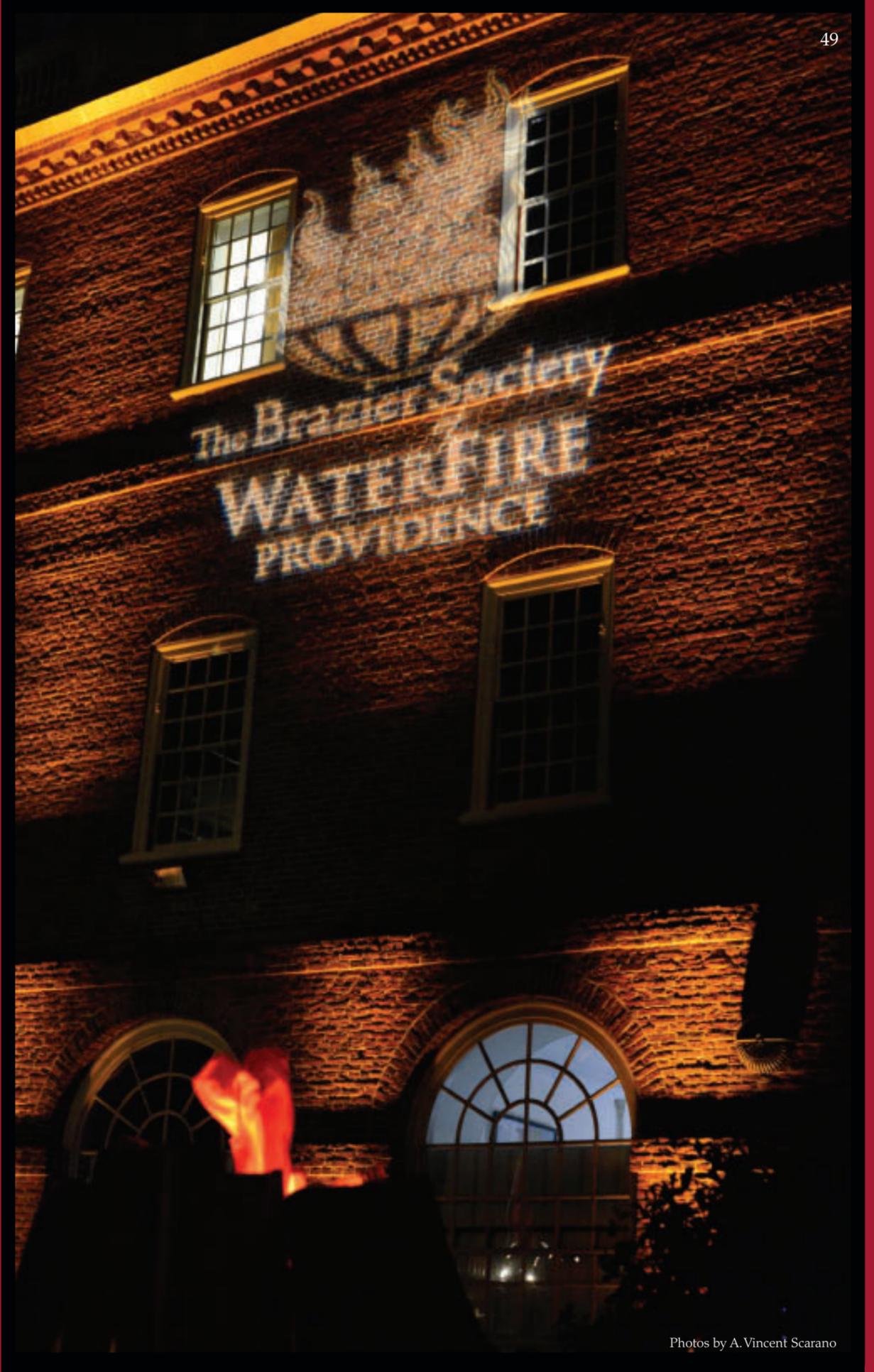
The divine providence that is WaterFire, Providence is all due to the prescient genius of artist and scientist, Barnaby Evans, the elemental alchemist of the fire, water, earth, and air at the bedrock of the event. Setting a river on fire to ignite an inclusive public arts

experience was Evans' response to the exclusion and elitism he had witnessed years before at a New York City art gallery. The story goes that a "newly minted art school punk" took great pains in limiting public access to a show, sending a blatant message that art was

earmarked for only the few and privileged. With this memory of social bias and stratification, coupled with growing tide of isolation within cities, Evans viewed the state of community as a "frayed textile" which required a rewoven story. There was a need to foster the larger idea of *communitas*: a Latin noun

commonly referring to an unstructured community that naturally enables equality, and/or the essential spirit of community.

Evans reached back to his western roots and childhood memories for inspiration, recalling warm and convivial family evenings spent underneath the stars and around the reflected light of the campfire, and he galvanized a larger idea. Uniting the seemingly oppositional and symbolic qualities of fire and water – both able to snuff the other out, but also able to resurrect and rejuvenate when in balance – in concert with the elements of air and earth – the artist devised an universal language to unite a splintering culture. Evans proposed to set a river on fire to create warmth, light, and desire; mingle it with music and sound suspended in the limitless sky; with the metal braziers and the collective participants grounded on the earth. The elements would appeal to all six senses and people would magically materialize.



Photos by A. Vincent Scarano

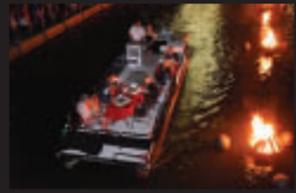


Photo by Jen Bonin

Setting a river on fire is not a simple task to execute. It requires a suspension of disbelief by skeptical bureaucrats who are slow to embrace an innovative idea. It also requires maritime permits, braziers designed to withstand the rigor of tidal shifts, a wealth of seasoned cordwood per night for a clean burning eco-conscious experience and a myriad of gymnastic hurdles over red tape. As a true creative, Evans seized the opportunity to problem solve challenging rounds of repeated rejections. With a cadre of friends and ad hoc volunteers to move wood, break down layers of ice on the river, and keep the fires burning, Waterfire debuted on a frigid New Year's Eve in 1994 with 11 braziers and a frozen river in Evans' adopted town of Providence where he had attended Brown University. People did brave the elements and came to witness the wonder of a phoenix sparking up out of the ashes of a failed city.

Providence was a city that had attempted a

multi-million dollar renaissance years after it had been abandoned in the 70's. The once robust industrial base had gone overseas; and the city was left behind with fouled waterways, rivers into canals, moving highways that had bifurcated the landscape, along with the railroad lines in the Northeast corridor. An ambitious building boom added to the renaissance with renovation of architectural treasures towerblocking the city. The new iteration of Providence was the jewel in the crown of New England but with one challenge: no one willing to bask in the majesty. They built it, and no one came.

WaterFire remedied this; and after the 1994 lighting, the city clamored for more with the event showing signs of expansion by 1996. By then there were 37 braziers burning over 5 nights and the momentum grew to make Waterfire into a bonafide non-profit with a city fully invested. The event now brings in a myriad of artistic talent with several regulars including the intrepid fire spinner Spaggo on the boat Prometheus and the silent mime in white face handing out flowers by the gondolas. Simultaneous new

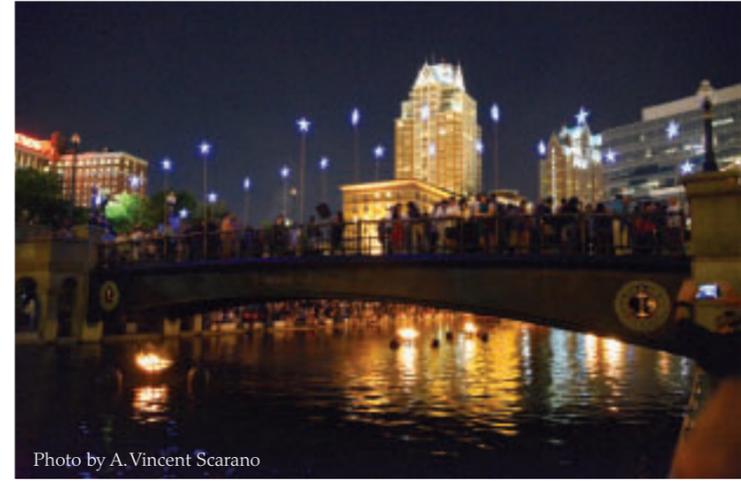


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events are strategically placed throughout the city to broaden the adventure. With additional funding the event has had the breathing room to expand without boundaries and affords the universal access to the arts that Barnaby Evans had first envisioned. It also realizes his dream of "communitas." Today Waterfire draws people from throughout the country and throughout the world. It brings the city an annual total of \$113 million in economic impact from tourism, job creation, and hospitality. Each lighting requires 18 boats, 15 trucks, 100 braziers, 19 staff, and 200 volunteers to choreograph each evening which begins at dawn and disappears by sun-up the next day, leaving not a trace of its existence.



Photo by A. Vincent Scarano

Throughout all of this unprecedented growth and expansion, Barnaby Evans has maintained his original sense of integrity, purpose, and vision. A visit to the Waterfire headquarters assuages any concerns. The building is a renovated old school

in a less than tony section of Providence. Evans and his team have taken up residence on the top floor with infectious creativity throughout the space. Barnaby is generous with his ideas,

time, and spirit and loves to converse about Waterfire's ultimate legacy and plans for its future.

The have just been awarded their own building in the same neighborhood: large and expansive

to create more elaborate art pieces and additional elements to add to the appeal and keep true to the original promise for ongoing engagement. Waterfire's universal language, appeal, and success have also expanded its universal reach. The event has been replicated around the country and around the world with the purity of original intention intact albeit 20 years later. Events have been staged in Houston, and Sharon, PA, Kansas City and overseas in Singapore, Berlin and Rome. Plans are currently underway for lightings Seoul, Ottawa, Hiroshima, Padua and Paris.

Tonight at the basin, the winds have stilled and the fires winnow down to glowing embers. It is a time for lovers and thinkers, dreamers and creatives to bask in the retreating flame. The music shifts and softens to say goodnight; and as the sun comes up, you wonder if you were dreaming an ephemeral dream but know you'll be back to dream it again.

WaterFire Providence is a non-profit arts organization whose mission is to inspire Providence and its visitors by revitalizing the urban experience, fostering community and creatively transforming the city. Full and partial lightings begin in late Spring and run through late Fall. The final lighting of the 2015 season is scheduled for November 7th at 4:34 PM as a Salute to Veterans.

Stay current on all WaterFire news, events and scheduling via the web at waterfire.org and on Facebook at: WaterFire Providence.



Photo by Jeffrey Stolzberg



Photo by John Nickerson