



Solaris

Summer Nights, Stage Lights: Top Performances to Enjoy This Season

By TODD MATTHEWS

Summer in the Puget Sound region means when the mountain is out, we are, too. But several indoor entertainment options are worth checking out over the next few months. Here are six performances you shouldn't miss this summer. »

Solaris Book-It Repertory Theatre June 17–July 9

Stanisław Lem's novel *Solaris* has fascinated readers since its publication over 60 years ago. The story of a sentient, oceanic planet's haunting and mystifying effects on a group of astronaut scientists has been adapted for television, radio, film, and even the opera.

Scottish playwright David Greig's stage adaptation was well received when it premiered in 2019—first in Melbourne, with subsequent productions in Edinburgh and London. Now Greig's sci-fi vehicle touches down in Seattle under the direction of Gus Menary,

a science-fiction fan who was introduced to the novel at age 15.

"*Solaris* was the first book I read that seemed to warn against unchecked interstellar human expansion and scientific exploration," said Menary, who recently stepped down as Book-It's artistic director after more than three years in the role. "It explores the limits of knowledge and the dangers of scientific experimentation. [It] questions the motives of the team of scientists and raises concerns about the potential consequences of their actions. It cautions us against that peculiar brand of 'manifest destiny' contained within space exploration and advocates that we, as a



Left: Gus Menary

people, look inward. That the true unexplored galaxy exists within us.”

Various adaptations have departed from the novel, and Greig’s play is no different. The novel’s male protagonist, Dr. Kris Kelvin, is recast as a woman of color in this adaptation, portrayed by actor Jay Woods in the Book-It production. The play also takes a deeper dive into each character’s backstory. Greig’s ability to grasp the novel’s humanity initially drew Menary to the script. “I’ve wanted to direct this show ever since I first heard about it,” he said. “It’s thrilling and a real wallop to the heartstrings.”

It’s also timely, considering the growing interest in visiting Mars, returning to the Moon, private-passenger space travel, and advances in Artificial Intelligence.

“The theme of unbridled technological advancement and unchecked exploration into realms and areas unknown to us, without thought as to the possible implications of that exploration, is incredibly relevant today,” said Menary. “With Artificial Intelligence, for example, we seem to be on the cusp of machines that may possess or exhibit consciousness. We have no way of knowing whether this first encounter will be positive or hostile or whether we will be able to find a common understanding with beings of our own making. This hubris and the possible negative ramifications of that hubris tie into *Solaris* in a big way.”



Right: Olivia Donalson as Anna of Cleves (center) in the North American tour of *SIX*.

SIX: The Musical The Paramount Theatre July 12–23

The queens in this modern interpretation of King Henry VIII, his half-dozen wives, and the infamous Tudor Era tale of gossip, adultery, divorce, and beheadings have more in common with Adele, Beyoncé, and Rihanna than any 16th Century royal court. Costumes adorned with sequins, holographic foils, and PVC replace traditional kirtles, bodices, and ruffs. Drums, guitars, and keyboards replace flutes, lutes, and violins. And a diverse cast replaces white historical figures.

“When you hear about Henry VIII and his wives, you might think, ‘OK, I’m going to see a lot of puffy sleeves,’” said Storm Lever, who portrays Anne Boleyn in this Tony Award-winning show that premiered in the United Kingdom in 2017, on Broadway in 2021, and arrives in Seattle this summer as part of a North American touring

production. “This is totally different. Because of the dialogue and the modern-day vernacular, you can instantly connect with these girls. We humanize them and make them relatable. The script is so good, and the lyrics are so fun.”

Although she’s been on tour with *SIX: The Musical* for over a year, Lever, who studied musical theatre at the University of Michigan and made her Broadway debut in 2018 in *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, says her energy and enthusiasm have stayed strong. “The show is so dependent on audience interaction and participation,” she explained. “It’s called *SIX*, but the gag is that there’s a seventh character—the audience. I am very in tune with the audience, which has kept it fresh—especially because we’re going from city to city where different audiences connect to different lines, which keeps this script alive.”

The result is a spirited and empowered musical that delights audiences while taking liberties with the historical record.



“Anne Boleyn might not recognize herself in *SIX*,” added Lever. “I know she wasn’t a five-foot Black girl like me. But if she listened to the lyrics and saw how she’s portrayed, what we have to say about who she was, I think she would love this version and depiction.”

Silent Movie Mondays The Paramount Theatre July 31

You could probably stream these silent movies at home, but things would get complicated if you tried to haul a nearly 100-year-old Mighty Wurlitzer Organ and all its pipes into your living room, then find someone to play it. That’s the magic of this wildly popular—and unapologetically analog—film series that continuously draws huge crowds on Monday evenings. This lineup includes four comedy shorts starring Mabel Normand (*A Little Hero*, 1913), Charlie Chaplin

(*A Dog’s Life*, 1918), Buster Keaton (*The Scarecrow*, 1920), and Baby Peggy (*Circus Clowns*, 1922). Bonus: Tyler Pattison performs each movie’s score live on the Paramount’s Mighty Wurlitzer Organ.

Buddy Guy The Paramount Theatre August 10

Less than two weeks after celebrating his 87th birthday, Chicago blues legend Buddy Guy arrives as part of a tireless two-year world tour entitled *Damn Right Farewell*. The Rock & Roll Hall of Famer and eight-time Grammy Award-winner recorded songs with Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf more than 60 years ago and is revered by his peers today. Eric Clapton calls him “the best guitar player alive.” Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page describes his music as “something of a primeval force.” *Rolling Stone* ranked him one of the top 25 guitarists of all time. Don’t miss opener Eric Gales, a former blues prodigy who signed to Elektra Records in 1985 at age 16.

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical The Paramount Theatre Sept. 12–17

This 12-time Tony Award-nominated jukebox musical is a sweeping, biographical account of the Queen of Rock & Roll, Tina Turner, starting with her childhood in rural Tennessee in the 1940s (when she was known as little Anna Mae Bullock, who sang in a local church), continuing with her volatile marriage to Ike Turner during the 1960s and 1970s, and finishing with her triumphant emergence as a solo rock icon in the 1980s. The show packs nearly two dozen classic songs—“Private Dancer,” “The Best,” “I Don’t Wanna Fight,” “Better Be Good to Me,” and so many others—into two hours and 40 minutes. Naomi Rodgers and Zurin Villanueva share the title role,

and Grammy Award-winning R&B, Soul, and Gospel singer-songwriter Ann Nesby portrays Turner’s protective Gran Georgeanna.

Last Drive to Dodge Taproot Theatre Company September 20–October 21

“I’ve always wanted *Last Drive to Dodge* to breathe romance,” said Seattle playwright Andrew Lee Creech while describing his 1880s Western that follows domestic worker Ro and cowboy Prophet, two Black protagonists who fall in love and dream of owning land and building a life together.

Audiences primed for traditional Western tropes might be surprised by the layers Creech adds to this familiar genre. “Because the Western has historically been whitewashed, the play flips and reclaims the genre a bit by centering Black people who haven’t had freedom that long and are still discovering what it looks like to have it. Also, the Western genre is a very male-dominated space, at times seemingly like it’s exclusively for men. In *Last Drive to Dodge*, half the cast are women with their own arcs, who drive many of the major events in the play. The markers of the western are there—cowboys, guns, dramatic and simmering dialogue—but not necessarily in the ways you’d expect.”

Last Drive to Dodge is part of Creech’s *The Legacy Plays Project*, an ambitious, nine-play cycle that explores American history and the Black experience. ACT Theatre workshopped *Last Drive to Dodge* in 2020, and it was read at the Ashland New Plays Festival in 2021. It now receives a fully staged production at Taproot.

“I hope audiences will be charmed by—and fall in love with—Ro and Prophet,” added Creech. “I hope they root for the couple’s future as they would their own.”