



## Meanwhile Park and the Art of Gathering: A Conversation with Jeff Paris and Matthew Ivan Bennett

### Description

There are few theatre experiences in Utah that feel quite like **Meanwhile Park**. Before the performance even begins, audiences drift into a carefully curated atmosphere of conversation, cocktails, music, and community. Guests mingle beneath string lights while waiting for the sunset to fade enough for the performance to begin. The result feels less like attending a traditional play and more like stepping into a temporary collective space—one built equally from storytelling, hospitality, and human connection.

This summer, **Meanwhile Park** returns with **A French Toast**, the newest play by acclaimed Utah playwright **Matthew Ivan Bennett**, directed by **Jason Bowcutt** and running July 9<sup>th</sup>–19, 2026. Ahead of the season, I sat down with Bennett and Meanwhile Park founder **Jeff Paris** to discuss the origins of the project, the emotional philosophy behind the space, and why intimate theatre matters now more than ever. The conversation became less a preview of a summer production and more a meditation on acting, comedy, grief, love, and the increasingly rare experience of gathering together in person.

## From Backyard Experiment to Cult Favorite

What began as an unconventional backyard experiment has steadily evolved into one of Salt Lake City's most distinctive independent performance spaces. In a 2023 feature for [The Salt Lake Tribune](#) written by [Palak Jayswal](#), Paris described Meanwhile Park as both a response to grief and a desire to create **“a place you could do all kinds of fun stuff.”** The venue's first major theatrical production, *Bennett's From June to August*, immediately established the tone that would come to define Meanwhile Park: emotionally grounded storytelling staged in an unconventional outdoor environment where audiences gather not simply to watch a play but to share an evening together.

The early productions also came with unexpected growing pains. During one dress rehearsal, nearby residents overheard actors shouting **“Help, I'm being attacked!”** and called the police. In response, the company hung a sign along the backyard fence reading: **“Performance in Progress. No humans are in danger.”** The story has since become part of Meanwhile Park lore, reflecting both

the unpredictability and charm of staging live theatre inside a residential neighborhood.

That first production transformed a modest backyard into an immersive theatrical environment, complete with string lights, late-night performances beneath open summer skies, complimentary food and drinks, and audiences seated only a few feet away from the actors. Paris intentionally designed the experience to feel less formal and more communal—something akin to storytelling—around the fire.

Even then, Paris envisioned Meanwhile Park as more than a theatre venue alone. He imagined a space where performance, visual art, music, and conversation could intersect organically. That vision has only expanded in the years since. The 2026 season now includes upgraded lighting and scenic enhancements, curated cocktails, performance art collaborations, and an art exhibition by Shawn Noise inspired by the book *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions in Utah*.

What remains unchanged, however, is the sense of closeness the venue creates. With limited seating and performances staged inside a private backyard, Meanwhile Park continues to resist the scale and impersonality of larger commercial venues. Instead, it offers audiences something increasingly rare: conversation, vulnerability, and the feeling of collectively inhabiting a story together.

A refreshing drink in a glass with a straw and a paper umbrella, accompanied by colorful candy pack  
Photo from my 2025 [Review of Meanwhile Park](#)  
(Treats provided in the ticket price)

## A Backyard Built from Grief and Joy

One of the most compelling moments of the interview came when Paris described the deeply personal origins of Meanwhile Park. What began as a redesign of a backyard eventually transformed into an immersive theatrical venue rooted in healing and memory.

Paris explained that the project emerged after the loss of someone important in his life, describing the idea of “meanwhile” as **a place to spend the intervening time**. Over time, theatre became central to that vision because, as Paris explained, it “brings a lot of joy and happiness.” Rather than simply creating a physical space, he began building a place where people could gather, hear stories together, and step outside the isolation and grief that often shape contemporary life. For Paris, theatre was not incidental to Meanwhile Park’s evolution—it became the means through which joy, intimacy, and community could coexist.

Rather than framing theatre as escapism alone, Paris described it as a communal experience where people can set aside the weight of daily life and simply exist together through story, conversation, and performance. Importantly, those kinds of spaces do not simply emerge on their own; they must be intentionally cultivated.

That philosophy permeates every aspect of Meanwhile Park. Even the pre-show environment becomes part of the artistic experience. Guests are encouraged to arrive early, share drinks and snacks, and connect with strangers before the performance begins. Paris noted that creating opportunities for human interaction has become increasingly important in a culture marked by isolation and digital distance.

This year, Meanwhile Park continues expanding the immersive quality of the experience. Paris discussed new set pieces and additional lighting upgrades designed to further elevate the professional atmosphere of the productions, while still maintaining the intimacy that defines the space. The season also introduces an art gallery installation featuring Utah-born artist **Shawn Noise**. Paris explained that the exhibition, *Prayers for Rain*, draws inspiration from the academic text *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions in Utah* and explores regional folklore and rituals surrounding rainmaking in the American West. Rather than functioning as simple pre-show extras, these additions help transform the evening into a broader communal and artistic event.



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) From left, Brenda Hattingh Peatross, Tamara Howell, Josh Richardson and Calbert Beck during rehearsal for the play “June to August”.

## The Intimacy of Unconventional Spaces

For Bennett, Meanwhile Park represents something artistically essential: intimate theatre created in unconventional spaces. During the interview, Bennett reflected on producing **Sam Shepard's *True West*** in a small record store while attending Southern Utah University, describing how audiences sat among aisles of CDs while different artistic communities intersected in unexpected ways.

That philosophy aligns naturally with Meanwhile Park's immersive format. Bennett described himself as someone drawn not only to theatre itself, but to theatre that collapses the boundaries between audience and performer.

**I am really at home in small intimate spaces [and] unconventional spaces.**  
**Matthew Ivan Bennett**

The intimacy of Meanwhile Park becomes especially fitting for ***A French Toast***, a romantic comedy written specifically for the venue. Bennett explained that the play was partially inspired by a canceled trip to France, leading him to imagine an exotic locale in Utah staged inside in a backyard. Yet despite the European inspiration, Bennett emphasized the importance of creating characters recognizable to Utah audiences.

**Representation matters in all dimensions, but I think it matters to people in Utah to see Utah characters.**  
**Matthew Ivan Bennett**

That regional specificity appears central to the production's appeal. Paris noted that the play features an LDS character who will feel deeply familiar to local audiences while also resonating more universally at a moment when many Americans are reconsidering questions of identity, belonging, and citizenship. That emotional recognizability ultimately connects to a larger thematic pattern running throughout Meanwhile Park's productions.



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Brenda Hattingh Peatross and Josh Richardson during rehearsal.

## Love as Meanwhile Park’s Central Theme

Perhaps the most striking revelation from the conversation was the realization that love has quietly become the defining thematic thread connecting Meanwhile Park’s productions. Paris reflected that although this focus was never intentionally planned, each work staged in the space has ultimately centered on love in some form—often complicated, unconventional, or intertwined with heartbreak.

**“I think love is a theme that comes through in every piece that we’ve done at Meanwhile Park,” Paris explained. “Pretty much everything we do is about love.”**—Jeff Paris

Bennett expanded on this idea through his own philosophy of theatre and acting, arguing that performance itself requires generosity and emotional openness.

Quoting [Lewis Hyde’s \*The Gift\*](#), Bennett remarked:

## “Where there is no gift, there is no art.” — Matthew Ivan Bennett

That sense of generosity feels embedded within Meanwhile Park’s entire structure. Unlike many traditional venues, the space prioritizes emotional immediacy over grandiose spectacle. Audience members do not disappear anonymously into darkness; they become part of a shared event.

At a time when live performance organizations continue searching for ways to reconnect audiences with theatre, Meanwhile Park offers a compelling reminder that intimacy itself can be transformative.

A woman in a green top and a man in a blue shirt sit on chairs, engaged in conversation against a backdrop of June (Brenda Hattingh Peatross) and August (Josh Richardson), *From June to August*, by Matthew Ivan Bennett, directed by Jason Bowcutt, 2023 Winner of 2023 Playwright Prize, Meanwhile Park. Photo courtesy of Jeff Paris.

## What Makes a Comedy Work?

During the interview, I asked Bennett what he believed was the secret to writing a good comedy. His answer revealed just how seriously he approaches humor—not as something separate from emotional depth, but as something fundamentally connected to it.

Bennett explained that comedy requires balance. Beneath every successful joke, he argued, there must also be emotional gravity.

**“In any good drama you’ve got to have counterpoints of humor,” Bennett explained. “And in a comedy, you’ve got to have pathos built into it.”**  
— Matthew Ivan Bennett

For Bennett, comedy is not simply about cleverness or rapid-fire punchlines. In fact, he noted that one of the most important lessons he has learned as a playwright is to resist becoming “too clever.” Working closely with director Jason Bowcutt, Bennett described refining dialogue until it felt emotionally honest, recognizable, and human rather than overly intellectual or performative.

**“To be simple, to be human, to be bold, to be recognizable,” Bennett said. “Those are all things I try to remember when writing a comedy.”**

That philosophy feels especially fitting for Meanwhile Park itself. In a venue built on intimacy and emotional immediacy, comedy becomes less about spectacle and more about recognition—about audiences seeing pieces of themselves reflected back through humor, vulnerability, and shared experience.

A man wearing a blue sleeveless shirt and shorts is performing an energetic workout outside, with a backdrop of Hamer (Calbert Beck), *From June to August*, by Matthew Ivan Bennett, directed by Jason Bowcutt, 2023 Winner of 2023 Playwright Prize, Meanwhile Park. Photo courtesy of Jeff Paris.

## A Growing Audience for Intimate Theatre

That transformation is clearly resonating. Paris revealed during the interview that ticket sales for *A French Toast* have already accelerated beyond previous years, with only about twenty tickets remaining at the time of recording. Additional performances may even be added due to demand. It is not difficult to understand why.

Meanwhile Park offers something increasingly rare within contemporary entertainment culture: slowness, conversation, vulnerability, and presence. Audiences do not simply consume a performance there. They inhabit it together. And perhaps that is why the space feels so emotionally resonant. It understands theatre not merely as production, but as gathering. As Paris described it, we choose to spend our intervening time hearing stories together. In 2026, that choice may matter more than ever. Meanwhile Park ultimately reminds audiences that theatre is not only about performance—it is about presence, vulnerability, and the act of gathering together.

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Promotional poster for the romantic comedy 'A French Toast' featuring two pieces of French toast on

[Buy tickets](#)

### Event Information

*A French Toast* runs July 9–19, 2026, at Meanwhile Park, with performances beginning each evening at 8:30 p.m. as the sunset fades into night. True to the immersive nature of Meanwhile Park, audiences are invited to arrive when the gates open at 8:30 p.m. to enjoy the atmosphere, conversation, drinks, and artistic installations before the performance begins organically with the evening light.

Selected from more than 275 submissions as the winner of the 2026 Meanwhile Park Playwright Prize, *A French Toast* was written by acclaimed Utah playwright Matthew Ivan Bennett and directed by Jason Bowcutt. The romantic comedy follows a straitlaced middle-aged woman whose carefully ordered life is disrupted after traveling to the South of France for her ex-husband's remarriage. According to the event description, her encounter with the jaded yet charming manager of a B&B forces her to reevaluate not only her relationships, but the values and identity she has long held onto.

The production continues Meanwhile Park's emphasis on intimate, emotionally grounded storytelling while pairing it with a uniquely immersive theatrical environment. This year's experience includes expanded lighting and scenic enhancements, themed cocktails inspired by the play, and an art exhibition by Utah-born artist Shawn Noise titled *Prayers for Rain*, inspired by the academic text *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions in Utah*. Together, these elements reinforce Meanwhile Park's evolving vision of theatre as a communal artistic gathering rather than a traditional staged performance alone.

Because performances take place in a private residential venue, attendees receive the exact performance location and additional details after purchasing tickets. **The event is strictly limited to audience members 21 and older, and no admission is permitted without a ticket.** With the production already more than 90% sold out and ticket sales moving faster than previous seasons, *A French Toast* is quickly becoming one of Meanwhile Park's most anticipated events yet. Limited

tickets remain for this immersive summer theatre experience in Salt Lake City.

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## About Jeff Paris

Jeff Paris is the founder and creative force behind Meanwhile Park, an immersive backyard theatre and arts venue in Salt Lake City that blends intimate performance, visual art, hospitality, and community gathering. Originally conceived as a personal project born from grief and reflection, Meanwhile Park has evolved into one of Utah's most distinctive independent performance spaces, known for its emphasis on new works, unconventional staging, and emotionally resonant storytelling.

Under Paris's leadership, Meanwhile Park has expanded beyond traditional theatre productions to include art installations, themed events, performance collaborations, and curated social experiences that encourage audiences to connect before and after performances. His vision for the space centers on creating opportunities for joy, intimacy, and human interaction in an increasingly isolated cultural moment. Through Meanwhile Park, Paris continues to cultivate a model of theatre that prioritizes communal experience as much as performance itself.

## About Matthew Ivan Bennett

Matthew Ivan Bennett has served as the Resident Playwright of Plan-B Theatre Company since 2007, where he has premiered numerous stage and radio plays. His work spans theatre, film, and poetry, often marked by a distinctive blend of lyricism, humor, emotional vulnerability, and social insight. A recent fellow at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, New Mexico (Fall 2024), Bennett is currently training as a Certified Actor with the National Michael Chekhov Association.

His adaptation of *Frankenstein* received the Best Feature Program award from the Utah Broadcasters Association, while his one-person play *Eric(a)* earned Best Drama honors at the United Solo Festival in New York. Published works such as *A Version of Events* (Stage Rights) and *Different=Amazing* (Leicester Bay Theatricals) reflect Bennett's ongoing interest in empathy, identity, and justice. His comedy *A Night with the Family* ran at the Omaha Community Playhouse, and his film *The Whole Lot* was selected for both the Philadelphia and Kansas City Independent Film Festivals.

Bennett's work has also been recognized nationally through the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, where *Let Down Your Hair* was a finalist and *Art & Class* a semifinalist, as well as through the Great Plains Theatre Commons, where he received the Holland New Voices Award in 2014. His short plays have been produced throughout North America, and his poetry has appeared in publications including *Sugar House Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Utah Life*, and *unearthed*. An alumnus of Southern Utah University and Futurescapes, Bennett is also a longtime member of the Dramatists Guild.

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