

WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 33, ISSUE 3
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New look, same
great content!

In this issue:
Cody's Up Next
Our Tribute Campaign
The Art of Laura Fuller-Cooper
...and more!



Behind the Curtain:

"HAPPINESS" in Conversation with Mary MacDonald Kerr, Cassandra Bissell and Mickie Maher

THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS

by Mickie Maher is hard to describe in one sentence - or a whole paragraph. In order to prepare for Next Act's production of this play, we put Mickie in contact with director Mary MacDonald Kerr and actor Cassandra Bissell, who plays Ellen.

Cassandra Bissell: First off, I just have to tell you that I've always got one foot out the door with regards to continuing theatre, and last winter saw me in a particularly dim and hopeless place. When David Cecsarini sent me *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*, it felt like the Universe saying "Wait! Don't go yet! Try this!" So, for whatever it's worth, you ought to know that this play has been a kind of beacon on my horizon. I'm a little terrified of it, but in the best possible way.

Mary MacDonald Kerr: When/why did you become a William Blake fan? Assuming that you are, of course...

Mickie Maher: When I was a student at the University of Michigan, early '80s, Allen Ginsberg came and read/sang at Rackham Hall in its beautiful old Art Deco auditorium.

He did his own poems, of course, but the finale was Blake's "The Nurse's Song," which he sang, accompanying himself on harmonium. The last line of the poem/song is "And all the hills echo-ed," which he encouraged us to sing along to, and this being groovy Ann Arbor, the whole audience did, repeating that line over and over for forever. And it was kind of glorious. I think I'm still there, howling away.

CB: Was he the seed of inspiration for the piece, or did it start someplace else and he provided the sort of "vessel" by which to

tell the tale?

MM: I knew I wanted to write about sex and love (very much so - I'd just come off a play about politics and murder and the very un-sexy George W. Bush and John Kerry), and I knew it was going to be in a dual lecture format, but the original subjects for the two lectures were *MACBETH* and mummification(!) It was a classic "Oh, duh!" moment when I realized Blake would be far better suited to the themes I was getting into. The story [included in the play] of him being found with his wife sitting naked in their garden reading Milton is probably fiction, but it feels true, and things that feel true are usually the cover pages for things essentially and consequentially true, and so make for good subject matter.

MMK: What playwrights did you "steal" from as you were learning your craft?

MM: Every one I read, the ones I liked and the ones I didn't. It's an automatic thing, I think, for

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On Sunday, December 11, 2022, Next Act Theatre hosted *The Retirement Roast of David Cecsarini*. A full house of friends, artists, patrons and other guests joined us as David was given the lovingly-comedic send-off he deserved. Panelists included longtime friends and collaborators Mark Ulrich, Bo Johnson, Mary MacDonald Kerr, John Kishline, Norman Moses, Jonathan Smoots, James Pickering and Tami Workentin. David was also treated to video roasts from Doug Jarecki,

Lisa Gatewood, Edward Morgan and Ryan Schabach and surprised with proclamations from the Milwaukee Common Council and Mayor Cavalier Johnson, as well as a roast from his own wife, Deborah Staples Cecsarini. David gave as good as he got and, all joking aside, expressed gratitude for all who have supported the work of Next Act. "I've really only amassed gifts," he said, shortly before dancing off towards retirement (literally!) with Deborah.

Photo: Mark Frohna



Cez Says "See Ya!"

playwrights. But maybe the biggest Open Sesame moment was reading Jarry's *UBU ROI* and seeing Caryl Churchill's *CLOUD NINE* within the same month, realizing "Oh, we're in the theater age of Anything's Possible, Everything's Desired."

MMK: What inspired the bold choice to have Ellen and Bernard speak in verse?

MM: The verse came very late in the game, born of panic. I'd written the whole play (unrhymed) and had a good reading of it at The Goodman in Chicago. The actors were great, the direction solid, but the thing was just, you know, a half slice of American cheese. Not even bad. Just there, doing nothing. The play was due to open for my own company in six months or so, thus the panic. I went home and curled up on the bed in a quiet ball of desperation and the first couplet—the first one of the play—came to me. I remember this like it was a gift from some minor god, the one who doles out favors to obscure, quasi-experimental playwrights. I wrote (or rewrote/translated) Bernard's first monologue that afternoon. Doing the rest took much longer, but was some of the most fun I've ever had in this job.

CB: As the playwright, what do you hope for an audience to gain from hearing this story in this way?

MM: An audience can sense that love, that excitement in an actor attempting something above and beyond the everyday, don't you think? You've probably felt that many times on stage. Outside the story of the play or the themes, there's just the thrill of the high-wire act of some plays. For me, it's just a charge to see actors squeeze into the rigid suit of rhyme and then make it their own, get comfortable in it, make the predictable and artificial thing look entirely natural. It's a great magic trick.

But, really, there's a mystery in what exactly the pleasures of rhyme are. It's a debate that's been going on (to get on my pedant's pony) for hundreds of years. People have hated it for as long as people have loved it.

MMK: On a personal note, I am especially smitten with the story of Bernard singing to Ellen at the gig where they fell in love. I have been married to a musician for 31 years. We had met, and I was trying hard to find reasons not to be interested in

him because I was exhausted by failed love affairs. He invited me to come see him play. I went, I heard, I was toast.

I am very much looking forward to starting rehearsal. Your play is just wonderful. It is smart, funny, beautiful, surprising, funny, sexy, heartbreaking and funny again. Did I say it was funny? Truly – I find that great, funny plays are rare and precious these days. I can't wait to spend hours in a room bringing this to its feet, sharing the joy with cast and crew.

MM: I love that story of how you met your true love!

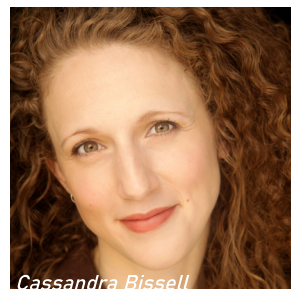
CB: Neil [Brookshire, who plays Bernard] and I have both said that part of why we love this piece so much is that it is ultimately grappling with what we feel are big, universal issues – our own mortality being at the forefront. But it's also hilarious. And maybe, also, in a most basic sense – a love story? It's nearly impossible to explain this play in one sentence. I have mostly just been telling people that I've never read anything quite like it. I would love to know how you would describe your play in a single sentence?

MM: Arg! I'm the worst person at synthesizing my own stuff. I mean, I feel like the play itself is the reduced down, pithy expression of the much larger thing that's in my head. Just tell people it's about sex and there's some stage combat of a sort, do not mention the rhyming (some folks just know they hate a play in rhyme even if they've never heard a play in rhyme), tell them about the sex again, don't say anything about folk music, and close with a hint about how much you get to swear.

[The full conversation between Cassandra, Mary and Mickie was longer than we could include here! There's more online: enjoy the inside scoop at nextact.org]



Mickie Maher



Cassandra Bissell



Mary MacDonald Kerr

Next Up: Cody Estle Takes a Seat In the Artistic Director's Chair

In April 2022, Next Act Theatre announced a big change: Producing Artistic Director David Ceccasari would be retiring in January 2023 following 30 years in the position. A nationwide search was conducted for a new Artistic Director, and after considering more than 50 candidates, Cody Estle was selected in October 2022. Cody, the former Artistic Director of Chicago's Raven Theatre, started at Next Act in December and spent the last two months overlapping with David, learning as much as possible and meeting the community. David officially handed over the keys at the end of January, and now it's Cody's show. We sat down to learn more about his background and what to expect from his time at Next Act.

Q: How did you get into theatre?

A: [Growing up in Ohio,] in fifth grade, my teacher decided to put on "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." There were no auditions, but she pre-cast me as Ichabod Crane. I think it was just because I was relatively tall and skinny. I remember afterwards everybody saying how well I did. I think what they really meant was "he was loud and the only one we could hear and understand." There was a sense that I was good at it, supposedly.

My father took the baton and ran with it, and started having me professionally audition for all kinds of things. When I got to high school, I was doing the school shows, and by that time I was pretty much hooked.

Q: How did you make the transition to directing?

A: My high school theatre teacher, I remember him just saying to me one day, "you know, Cody, I think you might actually be a director." Partially because I was more interested in what he was doing than what I was doing onstage.

When I went to college, I went in as a Directing major. I had actively looked for schools that allowed directing in the undergraduate program. I chose to go to Columbia College in Chicago: it was one of the only schools that allowed you to direct three fully-realized productions, in an actual theatre, not in a classroom, with a design team. The skills that I learned at Columbia allowed me to direct plays in storefronts in Chicago when I stepped out into the real world.

Q: How did directing in Chicago lead to your work at Raven Theatre?

A: I had a directing gig at Raven right out of school: the Artistic Director of Raven had come to see my work in school and must have thought, "this kid seems to know what he's doing." They took a chance on me to direct a play.

At the same time, at Writers Theatre, I had been hired to Assistant Direct a new play called *THE DETECTIVE'S WIFE*. I was assisting Gary Griffin. He was a Broadway director who directed *THE COLOR PURPLE* and other shows in New York.

Having those two jobs led to many other jobs. They opened the door to Chicago theatre.

I would spend the day at the big theatres assisting, and at night I would go and direct plays in the medium- and smaller-sized theatres, and whenever I had a free moment, I was working in the Second City box office selling tickets.

At a certain point, I realized that it would be a very tough living to just be a freelance director. When I would look at the directors who were making a living, they were attached to an institution: either an academic institution or a theatrical institution. It was more exciting to me to be in arts administration. I got hired to be the Artistic Assistant for a season at Northlight Theatre, and then a job came up at Raven, where I had continued to direct

at least one show, sometimes two shows, per year. They were looking for an Associate Artistic Director, and I was hired.

I was there for three years, directing plays at Raven while also directing other plays outside, and then the job of Artistic Director at Raven came up. The founders were retiring, and I thought, "well, I'll throw my name in the hat," and I got hired. I was the Artistic Director there for five years.

Q: What drew you to Next Act?

A: When I took over at Raven, the Board and I came up with big goals for the theatre. I realized that all of the things I had set out to do, I had done. There was no reason that I *needed* to leave, but I had been there off and on for pretty much a decade, and I felt like I was ready for a new adventure - a new challenge.

I was directing a show at Northlight Theatre in Chicago and working with [Milwaukee sound designer and composer] Josh Schmidt. He was telling me how much he likes working at Next Act and that I should consider throwing my name in the hat for the job, so I did.

When I got here, I was struck by how everyone would say to me that the reason they come to Next Act is because of the thought-provoking plays that have been put on.

I think that David Cecsarini has done a really great job of programming plays that make you think, make you ask questions and allow you to have conversations about the play days after seeing it. That was enticing, on top of the fact that I really enjoyed getting to know the staff and the Board. I could tell that they were dedicated and eager to see a smooth transition and that they would have my back 110 percent.

Q: What are things about Milwaukee that have surprised you?

A: I didn't realize how good the food scene would be. My partner and I live here in Walker's Point, and we pretty much just keep picking different restaurants up and down 2nd Street. They're all different, but they're all very good.

Q: What can the Next Act audience expect from you going forward?

A: You can expect familiar directors. I would like to find ways to tell more stories set here in Wisconsin. To continue to find those plays that are thought-provoking while putting my personal touch on the programming. I have no desire to completely reinvent the wheel. I want to work with artists who are here to really portray the excellent talent pool that we have in Milwaukee.

Q: What continues to draw you to theatre?

A: There's no other art form like it. The excitement that happens when the lights go down and you know that you're getting ready to be transported into a different world, there's nothing like it.

Every performance is different. It's not repeatable. Yes, it's the same play, yes, they're saying the same lines, but a gesture might be different. The way a line hits an actor might be different.

I think a theatre like Next Act with its intimacy, to be right on top of those performers, watching them take you on a journey is extra-special. It's what continues to make me want to make plays that are powerful, that make you think, laugh, cry. It just doesn't get old for me.

BLOW THE HORN! RING THE BELL!

NEXT ACT'S TRIBUTE CAMPAIGN IS DOING WELL! By Jane Flieller

As you may have heard, Next Act Theatre launched an important campaign on July 1, 2022. **The Tribute Campaign** is a two-year initiative created to support recent changes in artistic leadership and administrative restructuring, without depleting cash reserves.

Named in honor of David Cecsarini, who has led Next Act from its humble beginnings to the renowned arts organization it is today, this funding will ensure its continuation for years to come. Through the leadership of new Artistic Director, Cody Estle, the creation of a Managing Director position and the redistribution of administrative responsibilities among the existing staff, Next Act is looking at a promising future. However, these changes come with a price tag: recruiting, hiring and increased health insurance are among the items that need to be incorporated into the annual budget. We promise to steward contributions responsibly to optimize our administrative strengths as we focus on our artistic mission and educational programs.

We are on track with nearly half of our goal raised in the first quarter of the Tribute Campaign! Please consider a gift or pledge to help us reach \$200,000 by June 30, 2024. Add your name to the list of those who have honored us with a contribution to this important fund, above and beyond their annual giving, to get us to the finish line.

For more information, feel free to contact our office at 414-278-7780 or simply make your donation online at www.nextact.org. On behalf of Next Act Theatre's Board of Directors, staff and artists, thank you for your generosity!

Thank you to our current Tribute Campaign donors and pledges!

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Visually Poetic

The Art of Laura Fuller-Cooper

by Jim Toth

Two scholars of poetry find themselves in a bind. So, of course, they try to *talk* their way out of it in iambic pentameter! Such is the conceit of playwright Mickie Maher in *THERE IS HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*.



Our featured artist, **Laura Fuller-Cooper**, isn't trying to collage her way out of any binds. Rather, she is creating visually poetic art that often incorporates the *written* word. By combining imagery from historic documents, advertising, natural elements, hand-drawing and watercolor, her collaged visions explore personal biography and memory. Laura shows us that all artists are poets in their own way.

As well as a visual artist, Laura is a Board-Certified Art Therapist. She is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a founding member of Milwaukee Art Therapy Collective in Milwaukee.

of the Art Institute of Chicago and a founding member of Milwaukee Art Therapy Collective in Milwaukee.

See Laura's Work

Enjoy art curated by Jim Toth in our lobby gallery during the run of *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS* Feb. 23 through Mar. 19 from noon until 5 p.m. or before/after performances

Laura is a faculty member at Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and Mount Mary University. She finds inspiration for her collage work not only as personal narratives but through witnessing the stories of art therapy clients and the community as well.

Laura has shown her work in faculty shows and group shows in university and local galleries. She has also curated exhibitions at Milwaukee Art Therapy Collective, the Wauwatosa Public Library, the Magnet Factory, Woodland Pattern Books and the Wisconsin State Capitol Rotunda.



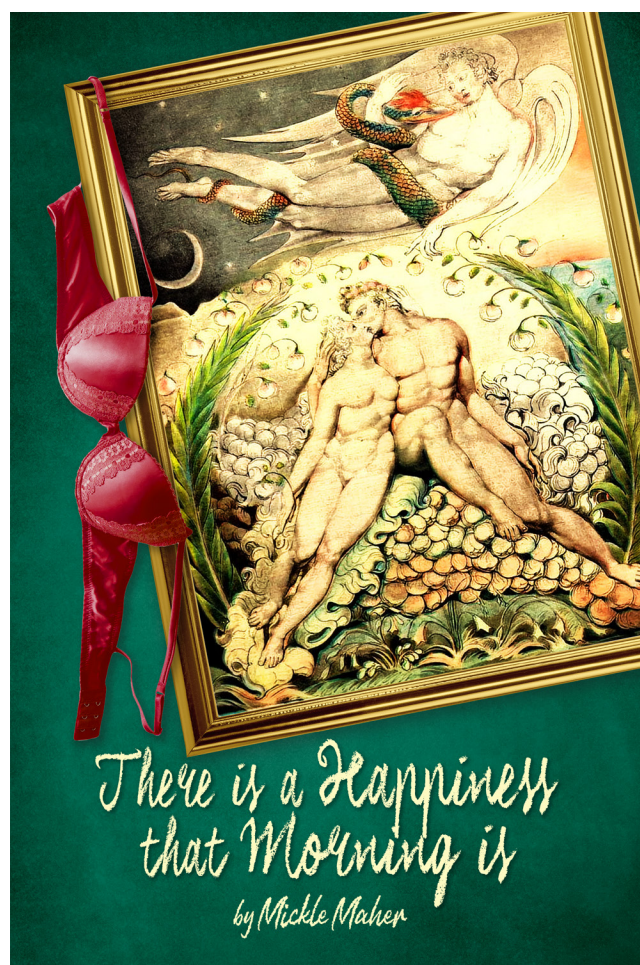


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