

# WHAT'S NEXT

## THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 33, ISSUE 4

APR 2023

Next Act Theatre has a history with playwright Bill Cain, author of the world-premiere play **GOD'S SPIES**. Bill Cain has a history with William Shakespeare, the world-famous playwright at the center of Bill's latest play. In order to help you figure out how this latest world premiere came to be, we're tracing the history of Will and Bill below:

## A STORIED HISTORY



**April 23, 1564**

**William Shakespeare** is (probably) born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Records indicate he was baptized on April 26.



**Mid-1599**

The Globe Theatre is built on the south bank of the River Thames by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

**1604-1606**

In real life, Shakespeare probably writes **KING LEAR** sometime between these dates.

*To make things more interesting, Bill Cain sets the writing of the play during the 1603 Black Plague outbreak.*

**December 26, 1606**

The first recorded performance of **KING LEAR** occurs; King James I is in attendance.



**1592**

First records suggest that Shakespeare was writing plays in London.



**July 25, 1603**

**James I** is crowned King of England. An outbreak of **Black Plague** limits festivities. Plague had been endemic in Europe since 1300 as part of the Second Pandemic and would continue causing regular epidemics until at least 1600.

*According to Bill Cain: Edgar, Ruth and Shax are quarantined starting this day.*



**April 5, 2019**

**HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE** by Bill Cain opens at Next Act.

**March 18, 2020**

Next Act announces the postponement of Bill Cain's **9 CIRCLES** due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Twelve days later, Next Act cancels the rest of its 2019-2020 season.



**April 26, 2021**

Next Act releases a video production of **9 CIRCLES** online. This was the third virtual production of Next Act's 2020-2021 season.

Bill Cain is commissioned to write **GOD'S SPIES** by Florida Studio Theatre. The play also gets a workshop at the Cape Cod Theatre Project.

**2021**

**April 27, 2023**

The world premiere of Bill Cain's latest play, **GOD'S SPIES**, will open at Next Act!



**February 2, 2018**

**EQUIVOCATION** opens at Next Act. Director **Michael Cotey** introduced Next Act audiences to playwright **Bill Cain** for the first—but certainly not the last—time.

*During the run of EQUIVOCATION, Next Act also produced ShakesFest, a play reading series that featured THE BOOK OF WILL by Lauren Gunderson and THE SEEDS OF BANQUO by Angela Iannone.*



**September 24, 2022**

Next Act Theatre reopens for live performances.



**April 15, 2022**

The world premiere of Bill Cain's Hamlet-centric **THE LAST WHITE MAN** opens at Next Act.

*[There's even more to learn about the history of William Shakespeare, Bill Cain and Next Act Theatre. Find out more at [nextact.org](http://nextact.org)]*

Second Black Plague Pandemic

COVID-19 Pandemic



# The Kids Are Alright: 25 Years of Next Actors

by A.J. Magoon and Pia Russo



**This summer**, our **Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens** program celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary! For years, Next Actors has been emboldening passionate high school students in Milwaukee and surrounding areas to recognize their value and connect artistically to their community. Even more importantly, the program has done so free of cost to students and their families thanks to the generous support of countless donors.

The program, originally called **The Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Youth**, began in 1998 when Next Act Theatre absorbed the assets and program structure of the Schneider Arts Academy. Over the past 25 years, the program structure has remained relatively similar: students spend several weeks of their summer improvising, discussing, writing and rehearsing a completely original theatre piece. They tour free performances at local senior and community centers, followed by talkbacks. Past Next Actors have written musicals, sketch shows and even a murder mystery!

Current Education Manager **Pia Russo** says there's a lot to be excited about for this year's Next Actors program and years to come. "The space we have created where we can offer an entirely free summer camp for teens has meant that we get a fantastic variety of students from all walks of life. Now that we also offer lunch every day and bus passes for students, I'm hoping to continue expanding our reach. Whether you are a student who couldn't go to camp unless it was free or a student who could afford to pay but chooses to come here because you believe in our mission, these distinctions never even come up between students. It is a testament to our humanity that we are allowed to see each other as people and artists before all else, and the teenagers in Next Actors understand that maybe better than anyone."



"During the pandemic, to say our communities went through a lot would be a real understatement. Theatre and education were both hit particularly hard. We saw the struggles of learning and art-making with us not only physically apart, but also in situations that might make us emotionally isolated as well. But I would argue that made us [or me, at least!] more aware and appreciative of our time together and the art we can make because of it. Now, with the worst of the pandemic in the rear view, the vision for Next Actors is to make some cool art together, but also embrace the 'summer camp' of it all - a feeling best captured in person. I am looking forward to us gathering and playing games and writing poems and dancing and exploring and singing songs in the tour van and eating so many sandwiches together for another 25 years."

The success of Next Actors is also due, in large part, to the support of **Werner and Sue Krause**. Since the early days of the program, generous sponsorship from the Krauses allowed the program to continue offering free opportunities for young people around Milwaukee. After Sue passed in 2021, Werner generously established the **Sue Krause Next Actors Scholarship Fund** which supports graduating seniors of Next Actors or alumni each year. Werner remains an important, supportive force behind the program to this day.

We look forward to celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this important program with you at our Next Actors benefit performance: mark your calendar now for Saturday, July 22!

## Next Act Board of Directors

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**What's Next** is a quarterly publication of Next Act Theatre

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Design by A.J. Magoon

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# Cez on Shax: One Last Question: Why GOD'S SPIES?

by David Cecsarini

**Bill Cain's latest world premiere** is Producing Artistic Director David Cecsarini's swan song. While he's already handed day-to-day operations of Next Act Theatre over to Artistic Director Cody Estle and Managing Director Kerri Kilbourne, he will direct and co-sound design **GOD'S SPIES**, the last play of his last season as leader of Next Act Theatre. For years, David has been answering the question "why this play?" in the Next Act newsletter, so one final time, we asked him "Why GOD'S SPIES?"

**This play is personal; characters are key.**

[The character of] Shax is Shakespeare, but not the icon. Sure, he's got longish hair and scrawls words with a quill, but he's just a living, breathing theatre guy who happens to be a magnificent writer. Shax is nerdy, a genius with blind spots, arrogant but with the capacity and willingness to learn and progress. He has terrible penmanship. Compared to Stoppard's Shakespeare (in Love), Shax is more mature, more vulnerable, more accomplished; he's no longer the romantic showman who writes **ROMEO AND JULIET**. Yes, he's looking to write his next big hit for the content-hungry Globe Theatre, but a play with greater depth and universality. Unfortunately, Elizabethan writer's block has got him firmly in its grasp.

Edgar is a joyously naïve Scotsman, come to London to witness his beloved King Jamie VI of Scotland unite the British Isles as England's James the First. The thick-accented lawyer/scrivener possesses that certainty of opinion and perspective which inevitably accompanies the young. His big-city journey, aided by Shax and a new-found female acquaintance, is a wonderful awakening to the predicament of becoming a fully-fledged human being in a world of frightening disease and sensuous contradiction.

Ruth is the heart and soul, and certainly the wisdom of this curious threesome. Smart, strong-willed and pragmatic, she has the strength and moral certitude to do what's right. This woman was meant to break through barriers and expectations. Despite her superficial, working-girl circumstance of prostitution, the author's heroine is pure courage and feminism leading to her final, triumphant act upon the Elizabethan/Jacobean stage.

**This play is timely: déjà-vu all over again.**

London, 1603, The Plague. Shax pursues his desperate attempt of creation during a city-wide lockdown. Earth, 2020, COVID-19. Bill Cain pens his nearly-perfect first draft of **GOD'S SPIES** during New York's lockdown in seven days (somehow, it seems, a deadline remained). In our story, the London rooming house is small and buttoned up - a 1603 writers' room pressure cooker. Outside, the Plague rages, a constant threat to our trio's demise. Proximity amid peril generates a near-constant churn of personal discovery and creative energy yielding what many regard as Shakespeare's greatest theatrical effort. We are there at its birth.

**This play is by Bill Cain: Cain's writing is not only efficient, but essential.**

Everything that is said must be said. The pages of his stories turn themselves as the inevitable journey unwinds, but still, the destination is a joyful shock, a delicious surprise, a mind-expanding revelation. And he incorporates a delightful sense of humor and irony into the mix - not forced, but arising out of character and circumstance. Cain finds human beings to be very funny creatures after all.

**Ultimately, this play is a love story:**

Love among people who learn that vulnerability becomes strength, becomes generosity, becomes salvation. It's love for creation, the unrelenting drive of pleasure and pain that propels itself forward, not to be denied in spite of the blind odds against success. And the story is love for the theatre itself, that all-consuming obsession for sharing humanity's deepest thoughts and feelings astride a humble wooden platform.

We look forward to sharing these thoughts and feelings with all of you, from our platform.

See you at the theatre.

*David*

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# In The Limelight: Talking With New Managing Director Kerri Kilbourne

**In December 2022**, Next Act Theatre announced that it was seeking to hire a Managing Director. Two months later, after a nationwide search, Kerri Kilbourne was selected. Kerri comes from a leadership background at private sector companies while also boasting volunteer service in the arts for UPAF, the Milwaukee Rep and even Next Act's own Board of Directors. She started as Managing Director in late February and has been hard at work since. We sat down to learn more about her:

**Q: What motivated you to get a BS in Electrical Engineering from Clemson University?**

A: My family owns an engineering firm, and I was always a good student. I knew that I was smart enough to get an engineering degree and that said degree would get me a job. That was the strategy I had [laughs].

**Q: How did that lead to your career?**

A: I graduated [from Clemson] in May, and as of the previous September, I already had a job locked in – I was fortunate in that sense. That was with Corning, Inc. in the western part of New York, in optical engineering.

I was always in a customer-facing, cross-functional role, working with the sales people, working with the customers, all of that. Ultimately, that led to leading people.

**Q: Why did you start volunteering in the arts?**

A: I had been volunteering with Habitat for Humanity [where I was on the board] and on committees in other places. I always like to be somehow involved in the community and do things outside of just my professional role.

When I moved to Milwaukee, I did not know a soul, so it was an opportunity to meet other people. With UPAF, I started as the ambassador within Bostik for the workplace giving campaign, and I did that for about four years.

Christine Culver, who at the time was with UPAF, introduced me to Annie Jurczyk, who was on the board at Next Act. [She invited me to Next Act], and one meeting in, I was a board member!

**Q: How did you come to work at Next Act?**

A: The company I was last with restructured, so I mindfully planned on taking a few months off – I just needed a break. That stretched longer than I had anticipated due to COVID and its impact on the job market.

I took that time and said, “you know, I don’t think I want to go back into the corporate world.” I liked the idea of pivoting, professionally, and when this opportunity came up, I posed the question: “what would you think if I applied?” The response, obviously, was favorable [laughs].

**Q: What’s it like working with new Artistic Director Cody Estle?**

A: Speaking with Cody, I quickly felt a very natural partnership. He has great energy and is a very dynamic person. He has business sense and will give input or ask questions, but he was the one to insist upon having a partner to take on the non-creative stuff.

**Q: What can people expect next from Next Act?**

A: We absolutely want to stay true to the essence of what Next Act is – thought-provoking, conversation-starting theatre.

It’s a different energy with two leaders – both from the “outside.” You have someone coming from a different city and someone coming from the corporate world. You have points of view Next Act hasn’t seen before. But we’ll stay true to the essence. We respect why people come to Next Act and want to make sure our work still resonates with people.

**Q: Because of your background, what do you bring to Next Act?**

A: I get to ask the dumb questions! [laughs] Practically every other person in this building has a theatre degree – it comes back to a different perspective. Somebody with an electrical engineering degree and a broad business background is going to think a different way.

**Q: What do you like about theatre?**

A: I like escaping for a period of time. I like that in Milwaukee, you can find both a comedy and a drama, something where you walk out going “whoa!”

I wrote on Facebook that I’m a true renaissance woman: the other day, I came to the play here [THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS], I went home and watched the Bucks play, and that morning, I had baked six different things. You can’t really put me into a box.

**Q: What do you want to leave people with?**

It’s a really exciting time at Next Act. Cody and I are in lock step and positioned to be strong partners to each other, which is a good thing for the theatre.

Also, I’m a dog mom [laughs].

## Flieller-Well!

In March, Development Director Jane Flieller announced her departure from Next Act Theatre. She and her husband Chris, with whom she previously ran Milwaukee’s In Tandem Theatre, are off to their next big adventure in Fond du Lac, WI.

Since joining Next Act in 2019, Jane has programmed both in-person and virtual fundraisers, helped Next Act come out the other side of the pandemic in a strong financial position and executed several other big projects, including the launch of our Tribute Campaign, now already halfway to its goal!

We are sad to see Jane go, but we wish her well in this exciting next step!



**Here it is!** Artistic Director Cody Estle's first season at Next Act Theatre takes what you love about our theatre—local talent in entertaining, meaningful and well-designed productions—and adds a new energy to it. This coming season, you'll enjoy timeless revivals alongside the best of new American theatre.

# OUR 23-24 SEASON

## SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN BY KIA CORTHRON

SEPT 20 – OCT 15, 2023

WISCONSIN PREMIERE

Thyme, a young Harlem girl, is an excellent student and hyper-aware of environmental issues, including in her own neighborhood. She is also married and pregnant. Her husband Erry is sincere and mysteriously, increasingly ill. As her pregnancy develops and Erry declines, Thyme must reconcile her boundless collection of facts and data with the reality of her surroundings. Kia Corthron vividly depicts the reality of how our systems often let society's most vulnerable fall through the cracks.

DIRECTED BY



Cheryl Lynn Bruce

Broadway: THE GRAPES OF WRATH (actor)  
Helen Hayes Award (won), Joseph Jefferson Award (nominated)  
Best Direction Awards: African American Arts, Black Theatre Alliance

## SCARECROW

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY HEIDI ARMBRUSTER

FEB 21 – MAR 17, 2024

WISCONSIN PREMIERE

A big-city actress lands back at her family's Wisconsin dairy farm to grieve herself back to life. But can she ever make enough meatloaf to feel a sense of purpose again now that her most important person is gone? A look at loss and survival. Resilience and renewal. And Hallmark movies. Broadway's Heidi Armbruster pens and performs a rip-roaringly hilarious and unbelievably touching one-woman journey of roller coasters, kittens and cows.

DIRECTED BY



Laura Gordon

FEATURING



Heidi Armbruster

Broadway: TIME STANDS STILL

SEASON TICKETS AND RENEWALS  
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SINGLE TICKETS ON SALE AUGUST 1

## THE MOUSETRAP BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

NOV 22 – DEC 17, 2023

The snow is deep and still falling as guests begin to arrive at Monkswell Manor: the eccentric young architect, the prudish spinster, the retired general, the weary traveler, the mysterious stranger. One of them is not what they seem... There is a murderer in their midst! Will one of these suspicious strangers be the next victim? From Agatha Christie comes a world-famous murder mystery with a thrilling twist ending. This clever whodunnit, the world's longest-running play, is a perfect theatrical gift for the holiday season.

DIRECTED BY



Mary MacDonald Kerr

FEATURING



Libby Amato



Lillian Brown



Margaret Casey



Jonathan Gillard



Rudy Galvan



Casey Hoesktra



Doug Jarecki



Josh Krause

## THE TREASURER BY MAX POSNER

APR 24 – MAY 19, 2024

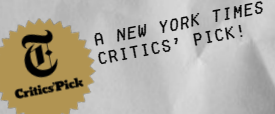
WISCONSIN PREMIERE

IDA ARMSTRONG IS BROKE, LONELY AND FADING FAST. AND SHE'S SPENDING ALL OF HER CHILDREN'S MONEY, FORCING HER SON TO ASSUME THE UNWANTED ROLE OF THE TREASURER: AN ARRANGEMENT THAT BECOMES UNTENABLE THE MORE HE QUESTIONS HIS DEVOTION TO HER. IN THIS DARKLY FUNNY, SHARPLY INTIMATE PORTRAIT, MAX POSNER CHRONICLES THE STRAINED TIES BETWEEN A SON AND HIS AGING MOTHER, AND THE HELL OF A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

DIRECTED BY

CODY ESTLE

(HIS NEXT ACT DIRECTORIAL DEBUT!)





bra•vo<sup>1</sup>

/brävō/

exclamation

1. used to express approval when ~~a performer or other person~~  
[Next Act Theatre, its staff and artists] have done something well.

"people kept on clapping and shouting "bravo!"

While that's a simple definition, Next Act's annual fundraising event means much, much more.

One evening a year, we not only celebrate the most recent season of thought-provoking and exciting live theatre, but also take time to secure the future.

You love Next Act. You love the stories we bring to life. You love the artists who grace our stage. **Help make that happen again for the 2023-2024 season: our 34th year!**

Bravo, Next Act! 2023 will be held on Thursday, May 25, 2023. Your attendance and participation jump start the next season by raising funds we need to begin. In addition to administrative overhead, our costs include salaries for actors, stage management, board operators and crew; pay for designers, house managers and box office personnel; royalties; set construction; costumes; lights and props.

Yes, your contributions make all that happen! Come enjoy food and friends, entertainment and raffle packages, a live auction and much more!

Bravo, Next Act! 2023

IMAGINE!

...what we can do with a little help from our friends.

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## Not Locked Down! Creativity During COVID

by Jim Toth,  
Curator

### Adversity + Isolation + Uncertainty = Inspiration?

Few things are more daunting to an artist than infinite possibility. The blank canvas or sheet of paper or lump of clay all taunt with a what-are-you-going-to-do-this-time challenge. What does adding the stress of a pandemic do to this dynamic? I wanted to know, so I invited past Next Act artists to share a piece of their art created during those 2+ years of chaos. Their response was very positive and I am excited to feature their work along with their stories.

Some found it difficult to work on their art while others found the forced isolation gave them focus. Some delved deeper into their already established themes and techniques while others felt compelled to address the pandemic directly in novel ways. All found that their creative outlets provided a respite from the "storm" and to an extent, a power of sorts over a situation beyond their control. Ultimately, the human spirit will abide, and our artists will help show the way.

As of this writing, I have yet to see all of the art work that will be displayed. But, from the response, I'm confident it will be visually stimulating and diverse, as the participating artists are both! Here are a few examples of what to expect:



"After Mass" by Coree Coppinger

### Come See The Art

Enjoy art in our lobby gallery during the run of *GOD'S SPIES*, Apr. 27 through May 21 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.

### Congratulations, Laura!

**Visually Poetic: The Art of Laura-Fuller Cooper** was recently featured in *Kolaj Magazine*, a quarterly, printed art magazine reviewing and surveying contemporary collage with an international perspective. Laura's show was featured in the Next Act lobby during the run of *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*, Feb. 23 - Mar. 19, 2023.



"Le Changement" by Laura Fuller-Cooper



"Chair a la Picasso" by Erico Ortiz  
"Behind the Mask" by Dara Larson (above)





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## SEASON SPONSORS



A lawyer, a sex worker and a playwright walk into a room. And then they stay. Shakespeare (Shax) runs London's most popular theatre, but now he's forced to shelter inside due to an outbreak of plague. With the theatres closed and no distractions, what's left to be done is to write a new masterpiece. Assisted by two unlikely companions, Shax (and favorite Next Act playwright Bill Cain) explore the mysteries of life, love and death while navigating the complexities of a world under quarantine lockdown.

*GOD'S SPIES* is presented as part of **World Premiere Wisconsin**, a state-wide festival celebrating new plays and musicals from March 1 - June 30, 2023, presented by the Ten Chimneys Foundation.

Apr. 27 - May 21, 2023	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					27 Preview 7:30	28 Opening 7:30	29 4:30 P 8:00
	30 2:00 T			3 1:30 7:30 P	4 7:30 T	5 7:30	6 4:30 8:00
	7 2:00 P/T			10 1:30 7:30	11 7:30 P/T	12 7:30	13 4:30 8:00
	14* 2:00 P/T	15 PWYC 7:30		17 7:30	18 7:30 T	19 7:30 P	20 4:30 8:00
	21 2:00 Closing	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can *Sunday Night Insights (Zoom talkback - open to all)					

**Directed by:** David Cecsarini

**Featuring:** Mark Ulrich, Eva Nimmer and Zach Thomas Woods

*Single tickets on sale at (414) 278-0765 or online at nextact.org*

**GOD'S SPIES is sponsored by Jan Serr & John Shannon and Donna Martynski**