

WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

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Still, There Is Hope

Reflecting on *SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN* with Kia Corthron

Playwright Kia Corthron wrote *SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN* in the mid-1990s - the play received its world premiere in 1997. *SPLASH HATCH...* tackles many current topics and issues, wrapping them up in a very human story. We asked Kia a few questions to help explore the world of her play - and her writing:

Your characters [especially Thyme] often speak uninterrupted at length and switch topics on a dime. How did you develop the vernacular and style of your characters' dialogue?

I don't know how much I "developed" their speech. I write characters' voices as I hear them in my head: Thyme, for example, is an especially inquisitive and energetic teenager.

Having said that, I do deliberately "play" with dialogue: the rhythms, word choices, the words I opt to leave out. The result is a heightened rather than naturalistic language. An unexpected

word or phrase or syllable—something almost natural but not quite—will hopefully surprise the audience, causing them to prick up their ears and become an active participant in the theatrical experience.

What was the genesis for this play?

When I wrote the play back in the mid-'90s, I'd been thinking a lot about environmental racism, terminology which has since been honed to the more universal and accurate "environmental justice." It's the phenomenon of environmental hazards intentionally being placed in neighborhoods of poor folks, usually people of color: waste treatment plants for the purpose of serving half of Manhattan situated in Harlem; nuclear weapon testing sites positioned near Indigenous American pueblos.

I wrote the first draft of the play in four weeks at my very first artist residency (I've attended many since): Hedgebrook, a retreat for women writers, on Whidbey Island which is north of Seattle. Spending that month in such idyllic surroundings—our cottages in the forest with the Puget Sound beach just a half-hour stroll away—was incredibly inspiring. Step outside my door and there were Douglas firs and red cedars and hummingbirds and rabbits with eagles

flying overhead in the endless sky, and I was overwhelmingly grateful for this bit of paradise while pondering on everything we have to lose. Perhaps it would seem counterintuitive, given that my play is set in the heart of the city, but we live on one earth: all connected.

Are there aspects of yourself that are reflected in the play? Particularly Thyme's boundless collection of facts, but also the sincerity and general love the characters seem to have for one another.

Yes, all that. There is definitely plenty of me in Thyme—her utter curiosity, her penchant for research. Also I do like to write about tenderness between people which, if built into the story correctly, never requires the word "love": it's obvious.

Who are your inspirations? Whose work were you drawn to - when writing this play, or even now?

Because I live in New York City (Harlem, like Thyme), I'm fortunate to have access to hundreds of plays (new and old) and I read a lot of novels (new and old). I am perpetually invigorated by good writing in both disciplines. But, with regard to my own work, a better question might be where am I inspired. My writing has always been sparked by social injustice, and I am often informed via progressive journalism. My favorite news source is Democracy Now! but there are others: The Intercept, The Nation, podcasts, books. For *SPLASH HATCH...*, I was reading a book while at Hedgebrook called *The End of Nature*,

Kia Corthron at the Hermitage Artist Retreat
Photo: Bruce E. Rodgers



STILL, THERE IS HOPE, continued
some passages of which still haunt me to this day. It was the debut of Bill McKibben, who has since become a major figure in environmental activism.

One of the most striking things about mounting this play in 2023 is how contemporary all the issues still feel. What are your thoughts on SPLASH HATCH...’s legacy after nearly 30 years?

Sometimes it feels very Whac-A-Mole. Around the time I wrote the play came the very first U.N. COP (the international “Conference of Parties” climate change conference) which was certainly hopeful—except, over the years, the annual event has been increasingly dominated by fossil fuel interests. BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell and TotalEnergies spend lavishly to pump up their green image on their websites—their embrace of emissions reductions and clean energy, how they are part of the “solution”—even as they escalate oil production. Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act has created on the order of 170,000 new clean energy jobs while the President has approved the ConocoPhillips

Willow oil project in Alaska as well as various liquefied natural gas facilities.

Still, there is hope! Thyme’s youthful passion is viral in the real world. Think of Sweden’s astonishing teenage (now twenty) activist Greta Thunberg. Think of the U.N.’s Youth Climate Summit. Think of the young people (the youngest being five years old) who, this summer, won their legal case in Montana, the judge ruling that they have a constitutional right to a healthful environment and therefore the state must consider potential climate damage when approving all future projects. For those who would despondently chalk all this up to a drop in the bucket, I love to quote Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”



Another New Face!

The Next Act team continues to grow and change. Join us in welcoming our new Technical and Facility Manager, Katie Anderson!



Katie Anderson is a technical theatre specialist who has worked on just about every type of live event you can think of. After graduating from Kalamazoo College in 2015 with her B.A. in Theatre and Studio Art, Katie went on to work as the Lighting/Sound Design Intern at the Kalamazoo Civic Theatre, designing shows and teaching volunteers of all ages. After her internship, she went on to work for Exclusive Events, Inc. in St. Louis, MO as a technician, building scenery and lighting for corporate meetings, weddings, live concerts and everything in between. Eventually, she moved up to Milwaukee to work for Blizzard Lighting as a full-time repair tech, while continuing to freelance as a technician and designer for live music and street festivals around town.

Her favorite shows she has worked on include *CARRIE: THE MUSICAL*, *ROMEO AND JULIET*, *TK NEW PLAYFEST*, *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*, *STILL LIFE WITH IRIS*, *HAIRSPRAY*, *IN THE NEXT ROOM (OR THE VIBRATOR PLAY)*, *OF MICE AND MEN*, *SIDESHOW*, *PEER GYNT* and *A CHRISTMAS STORY: THE MUSICAL*. When not in the theatre, Katie enjoys knitting, rock climbing, swing dancing and cuddling her two cats.

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The Tribute Campaign Cascades Onward!

by Tawnte Thompson, Development Manager

The many new faces, and the building and technical upgrades here at Next Act Theatre are the direct result of the early success of the Tribute Campaign launched in July of last year in conjunction with Producing Artistic Director *emeritus* David Cecsarini’s retirement and the transition to a new leadership team. We couldn’t have done any of it without the contributions of our many generous donors. With much-needed upgrades to our computer systems, printers and building as well as our recent administrative restructuring and new staff positions, Next Act will also be introducing a more comprehensive benefits package to ensure that our staff is poised for ongoing success.

Big changes like these come with additional costs. Our initial success with our 2-year Tribute Campaign has led us to increase the goal from \$200,000 to \$225,000 to help secure the future of Next Act. Even with the addition to our goal, we have surpassed the halfway mark in the campaign and, to date, have raised \$122,880 in support of these exciting changes!

Like the many tributaries that feed into a larger river, it will take the support of our community to reach our goal and to ensure that Next Act Theatre can continue to do the important and compelling work for which we have become so well-known. Donate now to secure the future success of Next Act!

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 all of our Tribute Campaign Donors:

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I Never Looked Back

An Interview with New Managing Director Libby Amato

Libby Amato has a nearly 20-year history with Next Act. In 2004, she started as a House Manager at our previous venue, the Off-Broadway Theatre. Since then, she has occupied no fewer than nine roles within the organization: onstage, backstage and in the office. In May 2023, Libby was named Next Act's Interim Managing Director, and just last month, she was named our new Managing Director. We sat down with Libby for a chat about her journey at Next Act Theatre and what she's excited about this season.

Q: How did you get into theatre?

A: My very first experience was in the fourth grade. I starred in a play called *ROBOT RESTAURANT*, where I played Mama, the restaurant owner. There were robots working for me, and hilarity ensued. I remember my dad being my very first acting coach and helping me find ways to make it more than just reading the words. From then on, I was hooked.

Another strong memory is the first time that my parents took me to American Players Theatre and we saw *A MID-SUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*. I said "I want to do that, I want to be that, that is amazing."

There was never really any thought of doing anything else - much to, I'm sure, my parents' chagrin. I look back now, and my dad, while I was in college, was constantly saying, "maybe just one business class. Maybe just the one." And

I thought "I'll never need that!" And here I am, and he's somewhere, just shaking his head and laughing at me. And I never looked back.

Q: How did that lead you to starting at Next Act?

A: I went to Carroll University and studied theatre there, and shortly after I graduated, a good friend of mine had seen that there was a notice for House Managers needed at Next Act. We both applied here and were both hired. I still remember that interview very fondly: it was with [former Managing Director Charles Kakuk] at the Off-Broadway space.

Very quickly, Next Act started to feel like a professional home. I fell in love with the work, with the people, and there was never a thought that I would not be here in some way.

Libby in *GRACE* at Next Act Theatre, 2013.
Also pictured: Rick Pendzich



Q: What else were you doing in those early days?

A: Like so many young theatre professionals, I was out there hustling. I was performing at a number of theatres, as much as I could. I also did a lot of commercial and print work through the agencies.

I got to a certain point where I thought, "a little stability would be good." For a time, I was with Kohl's Wild Theater, and that was a bit more of a regular gig.

Then, I worked at Skylight Music Theatre for about three years in the Development Department. I really enjoyed that: it was wonderful to have stability, flexibility and creativity all in the wonderful environment of the theatre.

Around the same time, a group of artists [myself included] saw some plays that we really wanted to produce and wanted to make some work happen, so we banded together and formed a small company called Umbrella Group. We got our non-profit status and, for several years, worked very hard and produced some shows that I'm very proud of. It was a wonderful learning experience as far as all the elements of producing a show, about how a non-profit works, about fundraising... for me, it was a kind of crash course on all of those elements.

After about three years, I left Skylight to go to a position outside of theatre, and I found very quickly that it wasn't going to work for me. It was a wonderful organization, but I needed to be around the arts.

It wasn't long after that there started to be a need here at Next Act for more regular help in administration, and I worked my way up from there.



Libby and others at a 2011 open house for Next Act's current home, 255 S Water St.

Q: What are you looking forward to at Next Act?

A: I am so excited about all the new energy that we have right now. Not only the new staff, but there is a sense of reinvigoration in the whole building. We come into this time well-prepared for the growth that we want to achieve. David [Cecsarini] left us in a really strong position to be able to say, "okay, great. This has been an amazing company for such a long time, and we're going to continue in that, but we're also going to take another step."

We're going to continue doing the amazing work we do, but how can we do more of it? How can we dig even deeper into what the community needs and serve them even more? We have the exact right team in place to get us to that next level.

Q: Why have you stuck with theatre?

A: I don't think there is any form of storytelling more powerful. There is something about sitting in a dark room, seeing real people living a story in front of you - there is nothing else like it. I wouldn't have been able to articulate it as a child, but I think I've known that since I was a child. It's this living, breathing experience, and it's a give-and-

take between the actors and the audience. I can't imagine not having that. I think it changes people in a way that no other form of storytelling can do.

Q: What else are you up to?

A: I got interested in soap-making when I was in college. I had a small business after I graduated for a few years before I got too busy with theatre and decided to put it aside. Then, about five years ago, I decided I'd bring it back.



I run Abbondanza Soap Co. and I make natural soap products. I especially like it because it's something tangible. Theatre is such an amazing, magical world, but it's very intangible. When it's gone, it's gone. I think I needed to balance that. There's something lovely about creating something that you can hold onto, and touch, and feel. And it smells really good!

I'm keeping it small, but it's something I hold onto because I enjoy it.

And I have two cats who are amazing and I love them so much. They're my "feline housemates."



"Feline housemates" Rory and Percy



A World of Change

The Lasting Environmental Legacy of *SPLASH HATCH*

In 1997, Kia Corthron's play *SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN* had its world premiere. The play addressed issues of climate change and environmental racism at a time when these topics were only beginning to enter the public consciousness. 26 years later, Kia's play remains as relevant as ever: conversations in the script about unseasonal heat waves, lead poisoning and holes in the ozone layer mirror those we are still having in our own lives. How much have things changed since 1997? Or have they changed at all?

1997

2023

Maximum Temperature in New York City, April

78°_F

89°_F

Average Temperature in New York City, April

52.08°_F

56.07°_F

SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN is set in Harlem, New York City and was written in 1997. In the play, Thyme says "The ten hottest years on record all happened in the last decade and a half." As of 2023, the hottest ten years on record have all happened in the last 13 years. Further, people of color are exposed to more extreme urban heat than white people in almost every major U.S. city. [Data: NOAA, Weather Underground, Nature]

Children (under age 6) in Milwaukee County considered "lead poisoned"

63.35%

4.7%

Lead poisoning, a pertinent issue in the play, has decreased significantly for children in Milwaukee County since 1997, but in the City of Milwaukee alone, there are an estimated 66,000 lead pipes and service lines, in addition to lead used in paint and other building materials. "The highest concentrations of lead-poisoned children have historically been clustered in the near north side, which is home to majority Black residents," says the Journal Sentinel. [Data: Wisconsin Department of Health Services]

Average Antarctic Ozone Hole Size

22.1 million km²

23.2 million km²

Average Minimum Ozone Concentration

108.8 Dobson Units (DU)

112.5 Dobson Units (DU)

"1985 they discovered that hole, crack in the ozone glass ... This flaw cannot be repaired, welded, this mistake took us down to the point of no return," says Thyme. In fact, thanks to the international ban on chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), global ozone levels have become relatively stable, and estimates suggest the size of the hole in the ozone layer will return to pre-1980 levels by about 2075. Still, problems continue to occur, such as a spike in CFC levels in 2018. [Data: NASA]

Consequences

The Environmental Art of Peggy Thurston Farrell

by Jim Toth,
Curator


Artists often feel compelled to address current events through their art. Corporate greed, perceived political corruption and environmental degradation have all motivated our featured artist, Peggy Thurston Farrell.

In her FOXCONN Series she explores the environmental consequences of the 2016 deal with the Korean company to build a multibillion-dollar manufacturing hub in Kenosha county, resulting in hundreds of acres of farmland and homes being bulldozed and the destruction of natural habitats including filled in wetlands after environmental standards were loosened. And yet, only a fraction of the economic promises made have been fulfilled. Visually engaging and aesthetically pleasing, Peggy's artwork draws the viewer into layers of media and meaning, bringing awareness to the consequences of unchecked "economic progress" on the health of our collective environment.

Peggy Thurston Farrell is an Emerita Professor of Art at Carroll University where she taught printmaking, design and was gallery director. Her work has been widely collected and exhibited and shown in both solo and group exhibitions across the United States, Japan and regionally, including the Milwaukee Art Museum, the University of Tennessee's Fine Arts Gallery, Tory Folliard Gallery, the Philadelphia Print Club, the Wisconsin Visual Artists Biennial Exhibition at the Anderson Art Center in Kenosha and the Southern Graphics International Traveling Print Exhibition. Her current works are colorful and thought provoking collages and mixed media silkscreen prints.

For more images and information, visit: www.PeggyThurstonFarrell.com

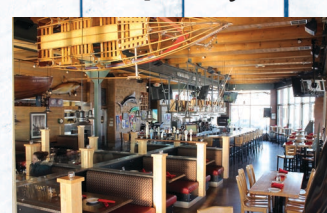
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			20 Preview 7:30	21 Preview 7:30	22 Opening 7:30	23 4:00 P 7:30
24 2:00 T			27 1:30 7:30	28 7:30 T	29 7:30	30 4:00 7:30
1 2:00 P/T			4 1:30 7:30	5 7:30 T	6 7:30	7 4:00 7:30
8 2:00 P/T	9 PWYC 7:30		11 7:30	12 7:30 T	13 7:30	14 4:00 7:30
15 2:00 Closing	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

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