



# Annual Report: 2022-2023

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## History

Next Act Theatre is a professional nonprofit arts organization located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Next Act was created in 1990 with the merger of Next Generation Theatre and Theatre Tesseract. The company was originally led by Artistic Director Jonathan Smoots and Associate Artistic Director David Ceasarini. Just prior to the company's third season, Ceasarini took the reins as Next Act's Producing Artistic Director and Smoots stayed on for three years as Artistic Associate. Around the same time, Charles Kakuk came aboard as Managing Director, a position he held until his death in 2014.

Next Act performed in a number of venues in its early years including Centennial Hall (located in the Milwaukee Public Library), the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Stiemke Theatre, the Todd Wehr Theatre in the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, the Broadway Theatre Center's Studio Theatre, the Humphrey Masonic Center and Marquette University's Helfaer Theatre. Seeing a need to establish a home space that could accommodate a growing number of patrons, Next Act created the Off-Broadway Theatre in 2000. This 99-seat theatre space at 342 N. Water Street also housed offices and a rehearsal space. Next Act would remain there until the sale of the building prompted an ambitious and successful capital campaign that resulted in a 152-seat theatre in the burgeoning Harbor District, just south of the Third Ward, along the Milwaukee River. The new facility opened in fall 2011 and after only four seasons, all construction debt was retired.

In spring 2021, Next Act welcomed Renaissance Theaterworks, another local professional arts organization committed to work by and about women, as a resident performing company. In December of 2022, David Ceasarini retired as Producing Artistic Director, a role he had held at the theatre for 30 years, handing the reins to current Artistic Director Cody Estle and, in summer of 2023, longtime staff member Libby Amato stepped into the role of Managing Director.

Next Act Theatre offers a four-production season of provocative and compelling plays. In addition to its regular programming and educational activities, Next Act often rents its space to small, emerging, and touring groups. Each year, guests enjoy four visual art exhibits, featuring the work of local artists, displayed in the theatre's lobby.

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## Season Programming

Next Act Theatre believes in the power of a good story: one that takes the audience on a journey, exploring relevant issues through intriguing plots and engaging characters. Next Act selects plays that reflect topics of interest for a wide-ranging audience: racial injustice, literature, living with illness, mental health, science, youth and, of course, the occasional heartfelt holiday story or Russian spy comedy. As an important component to Next Act's mission, there are ample opportunities to discuss the themes of these plays. Pre-show discussions and post-show talkbacks during each production allow the audience the opportunity to express their feelings, ask questions of the artists and come together to fully participate in the theatre experience.

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Comprehensive newsletters are sent to patrons prior to the opening of each show to provide background and insight about the play’s content. Complimentary workshops are offered pre- and post-show to classrooms attending productions. These efforts are intended to reinforce Next Act’s mission: to produce live theatre productions that stimulate thought, foster the exchange of ideas and promote the development of new perspectives and understanding.

Next Act opened its 33<sup>rd</sup> season with James Ijames’ KILL MOVE PARADISE. Featuring Marques Causey, Ibraheem Farmer, Dimonte Henning, and Joseph Brown Jr. Directed by Marti Gobel and sponsored by David Paris Dentistry.



*Marques Causey, Ibraheem Farmer, Dimonte Henning, Joseph Brown Jr. Photo by Ross Zentner*

KILL MOVE PARADISE also featured a Wisconsin first, a Black Out Night; the purposeful creation of an environment in which an all-Black-identifying audience can experience and discuss an event in the performing arts, film, athletic, and cultural spaces – free from the white gaze. The practice started in 2019 during the Broadway production of SLAVE PLAY and has continued for various productions across the country. The Black Out Night for KILL MOVE PARADISE was entirely sold out and incredibly well-received. It featured a Spirit Talk afterwards to explore audience members’ thoughts.

“I’ve rarely felt more connected to and seen during a theatrical production. I don’t have the words to adequately describe the power of the performances - but I guarantee I won’t soon forget them.”  
 – Patron, KILL MOVE PARADISE

Opening in November, TIN WOMAN by Sean Grennan featured Jordan Watson, David Ceasarini, Zach Thomas Woods, Deborah Clifton, Alexandra Bonesho, and Nadja Simmonds. Directed by Edward Morgan and sponsored by Marianne & Sheldon Lubar, Tom & Linda Streifender and J. Michael Reavis.



*Jordan Watson, Zach Thomas Woods. Photo by Troy Freund*

Next Act partnered with Versiti during the run of THE TIN WOMAN to connect actors and audience members with organ donors, transplant recipients and their family members.

“I think this performance was one of the best I have ever seen at Next Act. Not only was the acting very well done, but the play itself was very thought-provoking. It did cause me to discuss the play at length with my friend who attended with me, and it also caused me to describe the entire play to my husband last night. I am going to come again, because he wants to see what I am so enthusiastic about.” – Patron, THE TIN WOMAN



*Cassandra Bissell, Neil Brookshire. Photo by Ross Zentner*

In February Next Act opened Mickie Maher’s *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*, featuring Neil Brookshire, Cassandra Bissell, and Mark Corkins. Directed by Mary MacDonald Kerr, sponsored by Sandra Zingler and an anonymous friend of Next Act.

“My husband and I completely enjoyed this play. It was cleverly written and funny and the acting was excellent. On the way home we talked about how the ending caught us off guard and that we were not distracted by the actors speaking in verse as they did such a brilliant job of delivery. We also liked the length of the play.”  
– Patron, *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*

The 22-23 season closed out with *GOD’S SPIES* by Bill Cain, a World Premiere Production. Directed by David Ceasarini, featuring Zach Thomas Woods, Eva Nimmer, and Mark Ulrich. Generously sponsored by Jan Serr & John Shannon and Donna Martynski.

Because of its World Premiere status, *GOD’S SPIES* was made part of World Premiere Wisconsin, an inaugural statewide festival celebrating new plays and musicals that took place in 2023.

“Wow, just wow. The script was brilliant, and the actors were just flawless in inhabiting their characters... it felt like we were transported back to the plague of the 1600’s and were eavesdropping on 3 people locked in together.

“The characters were fascinating. The range of emotions, situations, dialogue and timing managed by the actions was just sublime... comedy, tragedy, and everything in between!” – Patron, *GOD’S SPIES*



*Eva Nimmer, Zach Thomas Woods. Photo by Ross Zentner*

## Education and Outreach

### Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens program

Seven students from Shorewood, Nicolet, Golda Meir, Whitnall, Waukesha, Cudahy, and Reagan High Schools participated in an optional 2-week play-writing program, followed by a 5-week program where they got to know each other, played theatre games, shared journal entries, improvised scenes, wrote sketches, and some of them started writing their own plays. Collectively, they developed a Variety Show. During the final week of the program, they took their show to Boys and Girls Clubs, community centers, and one senior center, which they loved. They performed in ten different locations in 4 days for 285



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audience members.

Feedback from students reinforces the importance of the program. From learning life skills such as teamwork, public speaking and the development of writing skills, to discovering friendships with peers outside their usual academic and social networks, NASTT goes beyond the traditional theatre arts class, encouraging teenagers to dig deep and foster meaningful conversations with one another. The program is designed to build a community through the creative process. Our alumni have gone off to study or work



in many areas including animation, political science, mathematics, dietetics and the armed services. Alumni surveys overwhelmingly show that students have continued to utilize the skills they learned in NASTT.

Next Act provides lunch and snacks for participants in the summer program free of charge. There has never been a charge for students or schools to participate in any of Next Act's educational programming.

"A fun experience, where I could maybe make new friends. It very quickly turned into one big little family." – NASTT Student, 2022-23

## **Student Matinees and Workshops/Community Project**

Next Act provides special high school matinees at low to no cost for each production in the season that is appropriate for a high school age group. Workshops are available to schools in which the Education Manager and/or a teaching artist (often an actor from the show), travel to the school to provide workshops pre- and/or post-show in order for students to gain a deeper understanding of the play's theme.

Each season, Next Act selects one production to supplement with a community project, in partnership with local high schools. Activities are based on the play's themes and vary from year to year. In 2022, KILL MOVE PARADISE by James Ijames was selected. 112 students from three classes at Rufus King, Golda Meir, and Ronald Reagan High Schools participated in pre- and post-show workshops with the actors and director; additionally, each class attended a matinee performance. The production dealt with themes of ritual and death; the students were asked to make ritual statements, in keeping with the themes of the play, and discuss the themes before creating pamphlets that explored their initial statements.

"I'm so glad we could afford the student ticket prices and bring my entire high school Theater class. We took advantage of the free pre-and-post show workshops, and the director herself, Marti Gobel, arrived in my classroom to set up my students for a deeper understanding before they saw the show. A few of my students had never been to a play before, and the plays they usually get to see are on a huge stage where they sit in the balcony and watch a story that doesn't relate to them.



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For KILL MOVE PARADISE, my students experienced theater so compelling and intimate that a lot of them were deeply moved and inspired. Afterwards, Director's Assistant Malaina Moore and actor Ibraheem Farmer followed up with my students in a meaningful discussion about the themes of the show, which can be challenging for teens to discuss openly." – Teacher Participant from Gold Meir High School

## **Talkback and Personal Preview Series**

Next Act offered many talkbacks and pre-show chats throughout the season. Next Act Staff and artists hosted many of the informal discussions, often including guest speakers from relevant fields to provide insight into issues discussed in the plays.

"Fantastic! Loved everything about this play. Great writing and performances. Unexpected twists and turns. Excellent minimalist sets.

Before the play, the woman who recounted her experiences as a recipient of a lung transplant added immeasurably to the experience." – Patron, Tin Woman

Next Act continued to offer one virtual talkback via Zoom for each production. These talkbacks, which could be attended by ticketholders from any performance, brought together patrons who had spent time ruminating on the themes and messages of each play and allowed for even more in-depth discussion with the casts and creative teams.

## **Newsletters**

Next Act published five newsletters in the 2022-23 season, providing information about upcoming plays, giving attendees the opportunity to learn more about each production and gain a deeper understanding of content, history, and themes. The newsletters also provided information about upcoming events, sponsor and donor recognition, and updates on our educational initiatives. In 2022-23, articles included the background of the visual artists whose work is on display in the theatre's lobby – a different exhibit with each production and curated by long-time volunteer and artist/educator, James Toth. Next Act was excited to introduce patrons to some of our new team members, as well!

## **Community Partnerships**

Next Act reaches into the community on a regular basis to identify and connect with other community agencies whose missions reflect a particular show's theme. In the 2022-23 season, Next Act worked with Versiti during our production of THE TIN WOMAN, which dealt with themes around organ donation. Versiti staffed a table in the lobby to speak with patrons about donation, and a representative discussed organ donation with the actors and crew during the rehearsal process. Additionally, a member of Versiti's team was welcomed during pre- and post-show discussions to answer questions from patrons.

During the run of GOD'S SPIES, Next Act partnered with Woodland Pattern Book Center and Marquette University's English Department for events that enhanced conversation around the play. Actors from GOD'S SPIES and director David Cecsarini joined several local authors at Woodland Pattern Book Center to read scenes from the play and discuss the theme of creativity during the pandemic and other times of



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crisis. Staff and community members from Marquette University's English Department attended a performance of the play and, afterwards, Next Act's new Artistic Director Cody Estle and Marketing Director A.J. Magoon joined them for a conversation.

GOD'S SPIES was also Next Act's entry into the inaugural statewide World Premiere Wisconsin festival. As a featured production in the festival, a cohort of Wisconsin-based playwrights attended a performance of the play. In addition, Next Act enjoyed cross-promotional opportunities with other theatre organizations across the state.

In the spring of 2023, Producing Artistic Director *emeritus* David Ceasarini and actor Carrie Hitchcock presented staged readings of A.R. Gurney's LOVE LETTERS at St. John's on the Lake and 5 Elizabeth Residence senior living communities, serving more than 140 residents.

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## Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

### **The Inclusion, Equality and Opportunity (IEO) Paid Internship Program**

Emerging artists of color are invited to participate internships in the areas of directing, stage management, design or administration. Interns have the opportunity to work one-on-one in a professional environment, learning from those with expertise in each field. The goal of the program is to help nurture the careers of these young artists, provide networking opportunities and encourage emerging artists to keep Milwaukee as their home base.

2022-23 IEO interns included Maaz Ahmed (Lighting Design, KILL MOVE PARADISE), Malaina Moore (Directing, KILL MOVE PARADISE), and Martilia Marechal (Sound Design, THE TIN WOMAN).

### **Black Out Night**

The 22-23 Black Out Night during James Ijames' KILL MOVE PARADISE was the first of its kind in the state of Wisconsin and, to our knowledge, the practice has not yet been repeated anywhere in the state. The concept was so well-received that the performance was entirely sold out and vouchers were offered for patrons to return for a different performance at a discounted rate if they were not able to attend.

Feedback from the patrons showed the event to have been a resounding success, many stating that it helped them to feel seen and welcomed into Next Act's space not only during Black Out Night, but also throughout the season. The vast majority of patrons were visiting Next Act for the first time and many of them have returned to view other productions.

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## Financial Overview

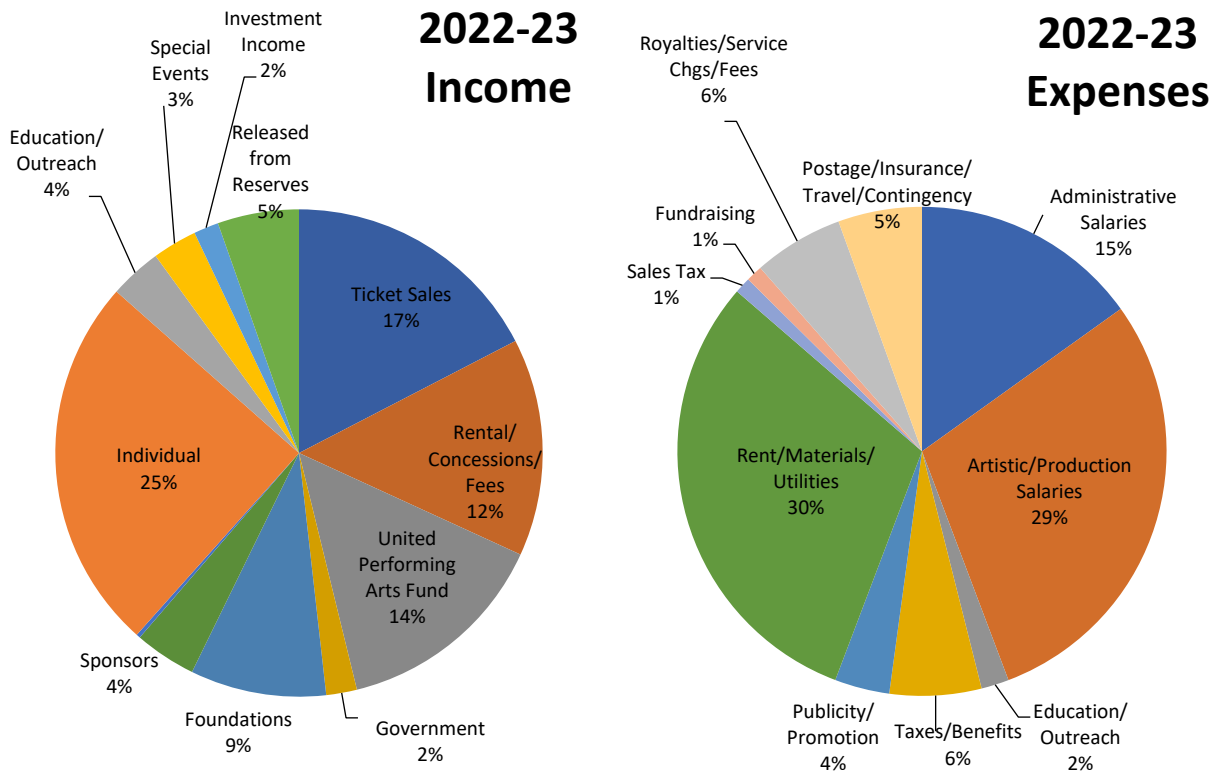
In the 2022-23 season, single ticket revenue goals remained only slightly lower than pre-pandemic goals and were at their highest overall since the beginning of the pandemic. The third and fourth plays of the



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season exceeded these goals. The first and third shows exceeded their group sales goals, with the second show coming within 10 percent of its goal. While overall group sales exceeded their season goal, single ticket sales fell short of their goal and slightly decreased from the previous season. Season ticket sales also decreased slightly compared to the 2021-22 season, but subscription donations were considerably higher compared to the previous season's total. Rentals in the 2022-2023 season included Renaissance Theaterworks's three-show season, some filming projects, dance programs, a meeting of The Water Council and an independent performance by actor Neil Brookshire.

In addition to administrative staff, 46 artists: actors, directors, designers, stage managers, crew, board operators, fight choreographers and musicians, were engaged in paid positions to produce a successful season.



**Earned Income:** Next Act earned 32% of its 2022-23 operating budget from ticket sales, special events, service fees, space rental, concession sales, equipment rental and interest. Total earned income for 2022-23 was \$349,485.

**Contributed Income:** Next Act derived contributed income (68% in 2022-23) from a variety of foundations, corporations, government agencies and individuals. Total contributed income for 2022-23 was \$748,091.

**Total Income:** Including earned and contributed income, the total income for the 2023-23 season was \$1,097,576.

**Expenses:** Administrative and production expenses totaled \$1,086,101 in the 2022-23 season.



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**Fiscal Responsibility:** Next Act maintains steady control of its annual budget, providing for necessary growth or reductions from year-to-year. The theatre finished the 2022-2023 season with a surplus of **\$11,476.**

## Donors

As a 501(c)3 nonprofit arts organization, Next Act Theatre relies on the generosity of hundreds of supporters each year whose contributions allow us to create exciting live theatre, offer free arts education programming and provide employment for artists, arts administrators, and artist-educators. The following were supporters of our 2022-23 season in the amount of \$1,000+:

George Affeldt	Greater Milwaukee Foundation	Ms. Joyce Mielke
Mr. Steven Alexander	Briggs and Stratton Fund	Dwight and Marleen Morgan
James and Terri Alioto	Colton Charitable Fund	Daniel P. and Julie Murray
David and Patricia Anderson	Judith A. Keyes Family Fund	Kathy Nusslock
Bader Philanthropies	Rob and Lori Morse Gardenier Fund	David Paris Dentistry
Mr. Robert Balderson	Ildy and Skip Poliner Fund	Pieper Electric, Inc./Ideal Mechanical
Donna and Donald Baumgartner	Jami and Joe Hanreddy	J. Michael Reavis
Bert L. and Patricia S. Steigleder Charitable Trust	Dave and Judy Hecker	Susan A. Riedel
Brooke Billick and Susan Bickert	Jeffrey Harwell and Matthew Helmerich	Anna and Dan Robbins
Brad and Glenna Brin	Herzfeld Foundation	Marianne G. Robbins
Sue Bronson	Andrew and Paula Holman	Robert W. Baird and Co.
Mary Ann and Charles LaBahn	Richard and Esther Huiting	Mary Ruffolo and Ben Litwin
Edward Hammond and Marcia Brooks	Cathy Jakicic	Howard and Sue Schoenfeld
Michael and Ericka Burzynski	Jewish Community Fund	Sempercor Foundation
CAMPAC	Jack and Lucy Rosenberg Donor Advised Fund	Jan Serr and John Shannon
Miles and Barbara Capron Fund	Pam Kriger Donor Advised Fund	John and Pam Shefchik
Angela Carollo and Peter Layde	Johnson Controls Foundation	Shubert Foundation
City of Milwaukee Arts Board	Annie Jurczyk and Steve Miller	Dr. Mark and Nancy Smuckler
Clare M. Peters Charitable Trust	Mark and Virginia Kannenberg	Gilbert Southwell III
Patty Compton	Werner Krause	David Ceasarini and Deborah Staples
Margaret Dethloff	Mr. Konrad Kuchenbach	Tom and Linda Streifender
Judges John and Jean DiMotto	Sandra L. Laedtke	Christine Symchych and James McNulty
Dorothy Inbusch Foundation, Inc.	Laskin Family Foundation, Inc.	Way and Jacquelyn Thompson, Jr.
Patrick and Patti Doughman	LCM Funds Real Estate, LLC	Julia and David Uihlein
Mr. David S. Flores	Ross Lloyd	David and Cheryl Walker
Helen T. Forster	Jane Lukic	William and Janice Godfrey Family Foundation Trust
Four Four Foundation	John Mahony and Evelyn Burdick	Lani Williams and Earl Potter
Tim and Sue Frautschi	Vince Martin	Wisconsin Arts Board
Pam Frautschi	Donna Martynski	Wilfred Wollner, Jr.
Gardner Foundation	Thomas and Renee McCutcheon	Dick and Diane Wright Charitable Fund
Judith Goetz	Kathleen McElroy and David Newby	Sandra Zingler
	John McGivern and Steve Brandt	





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## Planned Giving

In honor of Next Act Theatre's Managing Director from 1992 to 2014, the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society recognizes individuals who make a lasting impact on Next Act Theatre through their generous planned gift. To learn more about including Next Act Theatre in your planned giving, please call Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager, at 414-278-7780 or email [tawnie@nextact.org](mailto:tawnie@nextact.org). Unless specified by the donor, all bequeaths will go toward the development of our endowment.

Anonymous

Bob Balderson

Dave Glenn

Annie Jurczyk

Charles D. Kakuk\*

Ross Lloyd

Sally Marks\*

Jan Martin\*

Milan and Gordana Racic\*

Marian Weinberg\*

Dick and Diane\* Wright

Bettie Zillman\*

\*Bequest Received

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## Communications

Communication with our patrons is a top priority. Next Act publishes five newsletters per year highlighting our upcoming productions with articles that focus on why plays were chosen, background information on playwrights and the play's subject matter. Highlights also include upcoming rental performances, development and marketing updates and information about special events. The newsletter is mailed and emailed to our patrons.

Next Act maintains a Facebook page, an Instagram account, a YouTube account and a website, [www.nextact.org](http://www.nextact.org), for quick and up-to-date information. Patrons receive regular email blasts with pertinent information to make the Next Act experience more enjoyable. After every performance, attendees receive an email message asking for feedback about the show and their experience at the theatre.

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## Rentals

Next Act provides an affordable rental venue for small, emerging and touring companies. Dance, theatre, music and comedy have all graced the Next Act stage over the years. By having other groups in our space we:

1. Introduce Next Act Patrons to new arts organizations
  2. Attract new patrons from rental productions.
  3. Additional revenue is earned through rental and concession income.
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## Fundraising Activities

- At the beginning of the 22-23 season, the two-year Tribute Campaign was implemented to support transitional costs surrounding the retirement of Producing Artistic Director, David Ceccarini. At the end of the season, the campaign had reached 61% of its \$200,000 goal.
  - Next Act's annual Producer's Circle event took place in November, in which donors at \$1,000+ levels were invited to attend a reception in the lobby, followed by a sneak peak of a technical rehearsal of THE TIN WOMAN, and a brief discussion by the director.
  - Individual Giving and Education & Outreach funding exceeded goals.
  - Bravo, Next Act 2023 was held at the end of May, with a Beatles themed event at Next Act.
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## What our Patrons Say

### Kill Move Paradise by James Ijames

- "I was absolutely awed by Next Act's production of Kill Move Paradise. Everything about the production was outstanding. I love theater because it immerses me in experiences that are very different from mine. I felt the pain of the three men and the young boy. As a white person in the US, I also felt challenged by the play."
- "Those I've talked to so far were all wowed by the show. One told me how the young guy saying "Am I scary?" is something she won't be unhearing for a long time. Totally don't disagree!! There are so many punch you in the gut kind of takeaways in this show."
- "Thank you Next Act. Kill Move Paradise is one of the best productions I have seen, and I have been coming to Next Act for many years. I have never seen a play where the actors pull the audience in like this one. I sit in the front row and I felt part of the action. When the actors were at the edge of the stage they didn't look past us....they looked directly into our eyes. Loved it."

### The Tin Woman by Sean Grennan

- "We enjoyed the play VERY MUCH! It was poignant, funny and compelling-sometimes all at once. I find I am thinking about it the next morning and examining the characters motivations and feelings. If I lived in the area I would make an effort to see this show again. It is exactly the kind of production I appreciate from live theater."
- "I loved the Tin Woman storyline and the acting. I thought the play was well cast and evoked the emotions not only of myself, but of those around me. There were a lot of tears in the audience joining mine at the end of the play."



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## There is a Happiness that Morning Is by Mickle Maher

- “Next Act, in “There is a Happiness That Morning is,” again proves that excellent theater can not only challenge audiences but also entertain. What made this play work for us was the excellent acting and, of course, the “surprise” ending. What a treat. The only problem I have now is that my friends will get tired of hearing me nag them to be sure to go to the play.”
- “This is an instance when hyperbole is inadequate. The language and verse form of the play itself are brilliantly written. The intellectual dexterity and linguistic agility of the actors lifted the audience out of time and space and allowed us to experience the characters' condition and dilemma personally. My husband and I continue to talk about the characters and the ideas they wrestle with, seriously or ludicrously, and are considering attending again. I am so grateful to Next Act for its commitment to providing extraordinary theatre experiences.”

## God’s Spies by Bill Cain

- “The characters were fascinating. The range of emotions, situations, dialog and timing managed by the actions was just sublime... comedy, tragedy, and everything in between!”
- “We talked about the play enthusiastically on the way home and marveled at the production. I could not help but love Ruth and Edgar and wanted to embrace all the actors for bringing us so much joy. The dance at the end was a great send off and so in keeping with the period.”
- “I really enjoyed the show. I liked how humor was injected and how often I was surprised at the way in which it came out. I loved the performances. The actors were so in-sync with each other. Even the physical humor seemed so natural.”

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## Next Act Theatre Staff

### **Artistic Director**

Cody Estle

### **Education Manager**

Pia Russo

### **Production Manager**

Tawnie Thompson

### **Managing Director**

Libby Amato

### **Production Manager**

Jessica Connelly

### **Administrative & Artistic Manager**

Caroline Norton

### **Marketing Director**

A.J. Magoon

### **Ticket Office Manager**

Christine Yüendem

### **Technical & Facilities Manager**

Katie Anderson

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## Board of Directors

### President

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*Artisan Partners Limited Partnership (Retired)*

### Vice President

Haly Besaw

*RW Baird*

### Secretary

Donna Martynski

*Community Volunteer*

### Treasurer, Immediate Past President

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*Johnson Controls (Retired)*

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*Community Volunteer*

John DiMotto

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Annie Jurczyk

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*Clarios*

Paul Barno

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Mohammad ElBsat

*Carrier Globe International*

Jane Lukic

*Wheel & Sprocket/Kegel's Inn*

Susan Schoenfeld

*The Leaders Institute*

Michael Burzynski\*

*CliftonLarsonAllen, LLP*

Cathy Jakicic

*Blue Lotus Center*

Daniel P. Murray

*Broadway Law Offices*

Sandra Zingler

*Community Volunteer*

\*Past President