

WHAT'S NEXT



THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 34, ISSUE 3
FEB 2024

Farming is Fixing

A Conversation with Heidi Armbruster and Bree Beelow

SCARECROW follows Heidi Armbruster, the playwright and solo performer of the play, returning from New York to her family's Wisconsin dairy farm after her father's death. Next Act's upcoming production of SCARECROW also calls on the expertise of Assistant Director Bree Beelow (previously seen in Next Act's THE REVOLUTIONISTS and THE TAMING). Bree and Heidi both have farming in their backgrounds and later went on to work in theatre, so we sat them down to talk about the journey from farm to stage – and back again.

Bree Beelow: I grew up on a beef farm, and you had the dairy farm, right?

Heidi Armbruster: Yeah. But I didn't grow up on a farm.

BB: Right! So when did the farm happen in your life?

HA: We were always very farm adjacent. I lived on a farm when I was first born, and then we moved back to Wisconsin and we lived in a house in the suburbs like normal people. My dad got a job at the University of Wisconsin in the Department of Dairy Science. He was the "cow guy." That's what he said. When I would go to work with my dad, I would go to the University research farms and play with the goats and the calves and the barn cats.

And then my parents got divorced, and my dad moved to one of the UW-Extension farms. And when he retired from the University, he bought a farm right outside of Lodi, right off the interstate. I spent a lot more time with my dad after he retired, and a lot of time on the farm. He was doing all this crazy genetics, and you would look at it and think, "you're doing this right now with a 2x4 and some duct tape." Does this resonate?

BB: Oh, one hundred percent. They

grab what they have and figure it out, which is my entire time growing up. "Okay, let's make this work."

HA: Making it work! [After my dad passed,] I lived on that farm for two-ish years, and I was like, everything is broken all the time. You spend an entire day just fixing the shit you need in order to do the thing you set out to do. I realized, "farming is fixing."

BB: Exactly. That resonates so much with me growing up. It was always, "oh, we need this, or we need that," and you would go get it, and it would be broken, so we gotta fix it.

HA: My dad grew up on a farm, and he and his brothers had an Armbruster Brothers farm for a really long time, and still do – in fact, my cousins are operating that farm out in Muscoda on the Western edge of the state.

BB: So, you didn't do 4H or FFA [Future Farmers of America] or anything like that growing up?

HA: Not a thing! I got out of all of that because I took ballet class and did theatre.

BB: I have been showing pigs since I

could walk. We had big mama pigs that we would bring to the county fair every year. The first time I showed a pig, her name was Big Wilma, and she was much bigger than me. I was showing all the way up until the pandemic. It's something that has been super ingrained in me, this farm life, but I also did theatre, and I was in show choir, and I was doing all of that. The summers were farm time, and then during the school year, I was doing theatre.

I was always a performer. I distinctly remember going out to the farm and telling jokes to the cows, and singing to the cows.

I think my parents always knew that I probably was not going to take over the family business, and they were always very supportive of that. I remember my dad saying that farming does not make him money. It's not a lucrative business. He does it because he loves it, not because it's going to make him a millionaire.

HA: That's very cool. It's a little different than my story. I think my dad was mostly confused and worried,

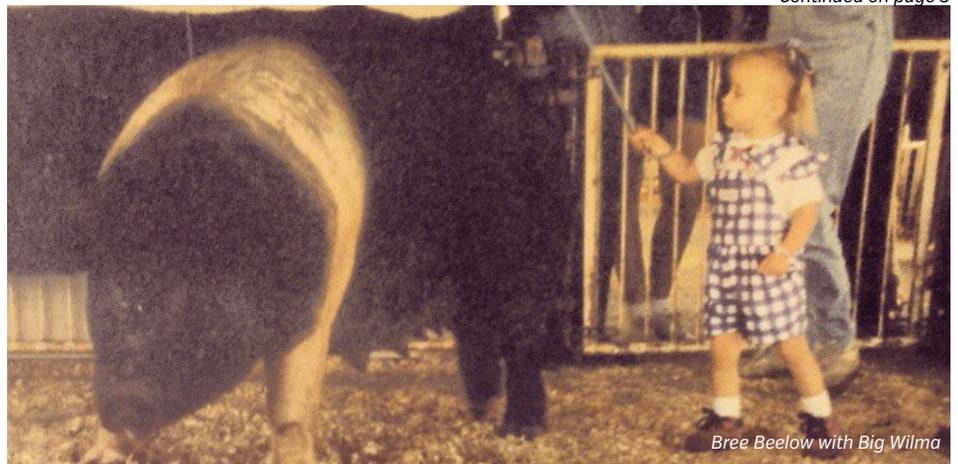
Continued on page 3



Heidi Armbruster



Bree Beelow



Bree Beelow with Big Wilma

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Three Cheers for **MRS. CHRISTIE!**

by A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

On Monday, December 4, 2023, Next Act Theatre presented a one-night-only staged reading of Heidi Armbruster's play **MRS. CHRISTIE**, directed by Laura Gordon, in connection with our production of Agatha Christie's **THE MOUSETRAP!** Heidi's play, a time-bending comedy about Agatha Christie and a modern amateur sleuth, was a popular affair - tickets sold so well that a waiting list had to be created (although through luck and creative arranging, everyone who showed up got to see the play). Members of our Producer's Circle even got to meet with Heidi and Laura beforehand to ask questions! We're excited to see more of Heidi and Laura's work this month during **SCARECROW**. Thanks to our cast, creative team and audience for a great evening of theatre!



From left: Kaylene Howard, Casey Hoekstra, Grace Berendt, Elyse Edelman, Cassandra Bissell, Joe Picchetti, Jenny Wanasek, Michael Stebbins and Heidi Armbruster.
Photo: Caroline Norton

WE'RE ALMOST THERE!

Next Act Theatre's Tribute Campaign, launched in honor of Producing Artistic Director *emeritus* David Cecsarini and used to support us through our recent leadership transition, has reached **94 percent of its goal!** We need your help to finish strong by the end of the 2023-24 season. Make a donation before June 30 by calling [414] 278-0765 or visiting nextact.org/donate to show your support for *Our Next Act!*



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What's Next is a publication of Next Act Theatre

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FARMING IS FIXING, continued

especially about the money portion of it. Probably because he was a farmer and hadn't made a whole bunch of money.

But I don't know that there's another farmer in the entire state of Wisconsin that has seen as many Off-Broadway plays as Jim Armbruster saw. He drove himself to see a play that I wrote in Vermont. He was 80!

BB: I also have friends whose parents were farmers, and none of them followed in those footsteps. They're all doing their own thing. How did that feel leaving that, for you?

HA: I had never met an actor, and I didn't understand that that was a job you could do. I think that my idea of an artist was feast or famine - either you were a movie star or you were a starving artist. I liked acting in high school, but I thought I would be a lawyer.

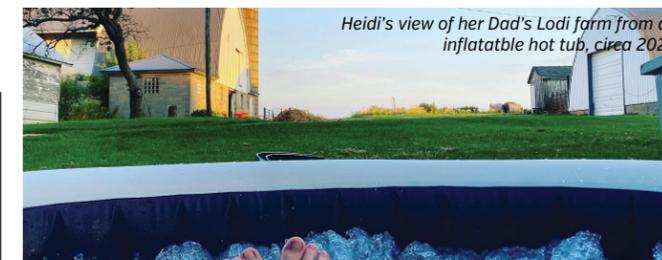
My dad knew that there was a bunch of scholarships that went unclaimed, and I had gotten good grades, so I applied, and I went to Madison on a Land O' Lakes Butter Scholarship as an Agricultural Journalism major. So I was taking a bunch of Economics and Journalism classes, and I was pretty miserable.

And then about halfway through the five-year plan at Madison, I started doing plays again, and thought, "oh, right. I don't know what kind of job this is going towards, but at least I'm not miserable." But after that initial year or two of being pretty miserable as an Ag Journalism... butter lady, I never looked back.

BB: I did go back - in the heart of the pandemic. And you do just hop back into your role. Getting into the routine of, "oh, okay, we're going to wake up, and we're going to head over to the farm and feed the animals, or do the garden, all of that stuff." I did love it.

Growing up, and becoming an adult now especially, I feel like there's two sides of me: this farm side that I connect with so deeply in my bones and live for, and this acting-theatre side of me which is very much more "city girl." It's hard to balance both, but I want to be able to balance both, because both made me who I am today.

HA: It's weird. I couldn't imagine ever coming back to Wisconsin, and then similarly in the pandemic, I was in my apartment in Brooklyn by myself and it got a little scary. My father had passed away



Heidi's view of her Dad's Lodi farm from an inflatable hot tub, circa 2020

that January, and I drove back to Wisconsin on April 1. I was there in my dad's house on the farm all by myself, no more animals except for the ones that the neighbor was keeping there.

But being on the farm myself, I got to be with my dad after he was gone.

BB: Did you ever get to try to drive a John Deere tractor or anything like that?

HA: The John Deere lawnmower. We had a sort of giant lawnmower, and I loved that thing. I *loved* it. It was a larger-than-your-average riding mower, but let's be real, it was a go kart in the John Deere line. I never have gotten to drive a... I can't even imagine. You must do this all the time.

BB: The main thing I did was cut and bale hay, that was my job. It's so funny, during the summer, I always ended up getting the tractor that didn't have a [cabin] on it. I remember my dad would say "you know, you should be paying me, I shouldn't be paying you. You're getting a free tan, you're getting your hair lightened for free and you're listening to music all day!"

HA: This is my hay baling story: I must've been eight or nine and I said "shit." I was punished to do two weeks of "hard labor." It was probably wiping mirrors and vacuuming. But I was so good that then they told me if I went to bale hay with my dad, I could cash in my second week of "hard labor."

I remember that day - I went with my dad to my cousins' and helped bale hay. I felt so special. I don't know if it's genetic, or if it's growing up around it and seeing it, and it feeling kind of aspirational. Or if deep down, everyone's a farmer. But that feeling of working outside for 10 hours and being tired and dirty and starving is such an exciting feeling to me.

BB: It is! It's that accomplishment, you know? And farmers are resilient. Shit happens, things happen, and you have to keep going. You have to figure it out.

HA: That's interesting, that idea of resiliency. That makes a lot of sense. I think about my dad - it's about being 80 and coming to see a play. He never stopped evolving.

There is something about evolving, and I don't think we think of farmers that way. We think of people as "stuck in their ways" and "not willing to change." I think also it's an industry that changes as quickly as any other industry does, and you adapt or die. There's a lot of evolution and change that happens inside of it as a part of that resiliency.

Heidi and Bree discussed more that we didn't have room for! For the full interview, check out nextact.org

NEXT ACT THEATRE'S 2024-2025 SEASON

**MUST
SEE
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Friends,

For our upcoming season, we've programmed four shows that are going to delight, entertain and invigorate you. These plays investigate some of the most urgent questions of our day with theatrical style and panache, a mixture of the beloved and the new that will leave you thinking: this is *must see theatre*!

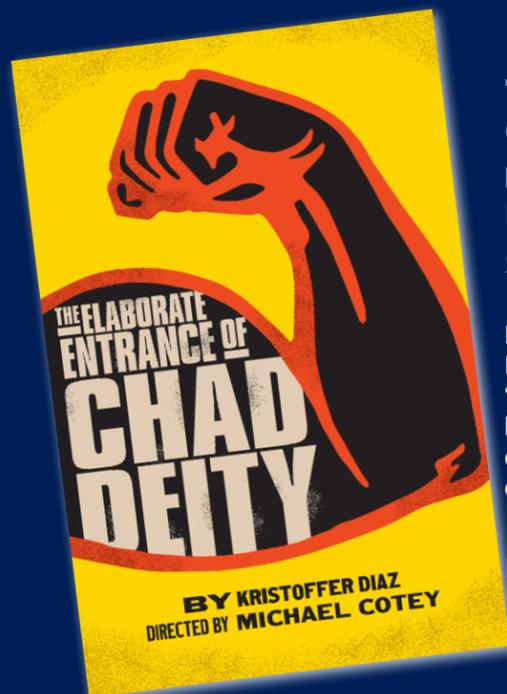
I view a season as an opportunity to tell a wide range of stories, in a variety of theatrical styles and reflecting a diversity of lived experiences. This season is a dynamic collection of comedies, dramas, spectacles and intimate portraits that shine a light on the past, celebrate the present and imagine a better future.

I look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

Yours,



Cody Estle
Artistic Director



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BY KRISTOFFER DIAZ
DIRECTED BY MICHAEL COTEY

SEPT 11 - OCT 6, 2024

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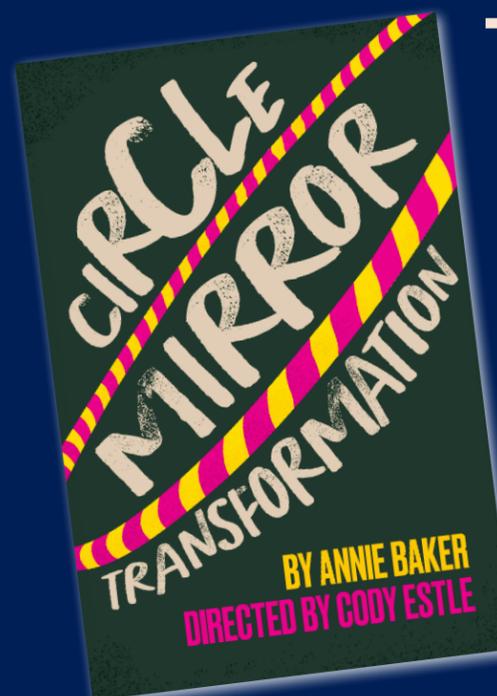
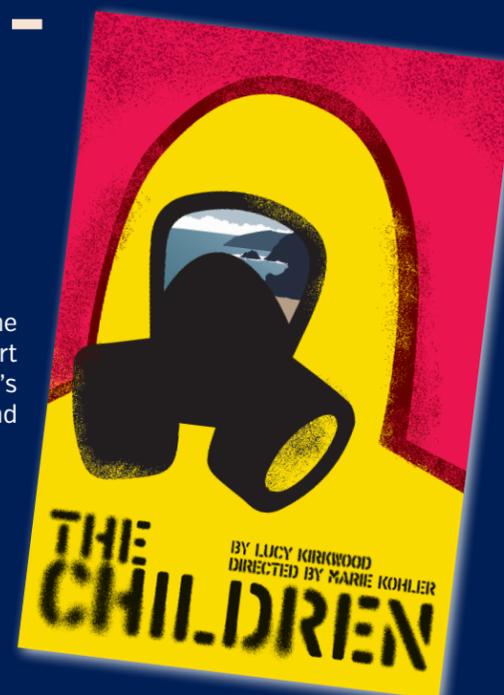
ALMOST, MAINE
BY JOHN CARIANI
DIRECTED BY KAREN ESTRADA
NOV 20 - DEC 15, 2024

Welcome to Almost, Maine, a place that's so far north, it's almost in Canada. It's not quite a town, because its residents never got around to getting organized. So it almost doesn't exist. One cold, clear, winter night, as the northern lights hover in the star-filled sky above, the residents of Almost, Maine, find themselves falling in and out of love in unexpected and hilarious ways. Knees may bruise and hearts may break, but as magic fills the air, the pieces finally fall into place – almost.

THE CHILDREN
BY LUCY KIRKWOOD
DIRECTED BY MARIE KOHLER
FEB 12 - MAR 9, 2025

Two retired nuclear scientists reside in an isolated cottage by the sea as the world around them crumbles. Together they are going to live forever on yogurt and yoga, until an old friend arrives with a frightening request. Lucy Kirkwood's hit play is a beautifully-written puzzle about personal responsibility, guilt and what we leave our young.

FEATURING Mary MacDonald Kerr and Brian Mani



CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION
BY ANNIE BAKER
DIRECTED BY CODY ESTLE
APR 23 - MAY 18, 2025

Breathe in. Breathe out. Start again. Four lost New Englanders enroll in Marty's community center drama class to experiment with theatre games and try to find meaning in their lives. Over the course of six weeks, hearts are quietly torn apart and tiny wars of epic proportions are waged and won. Annie Baker's beautifully-crafted diorama of a comedy shows us, with terrific detail and clarity, the hilarious sadness of a motley quintet.

FEATURING Elyse Edelman, Mark Ulrich and Tami Workentin

NEXT ACTORS IS GETTING A FRESH COAT OF PAINT!

By Pia Russo, Education Manager; and Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager



For 25 years, Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens (NASTT) has offered a safe place for high school-aged students to explore playwriting and performance skills as well as life skills including collaboration, confidence, public speaking, the art of enjoying a “sunbutter” (sunflower seed butter) and jelly sandwich in the park and so much more. While NASTT has served hundreds of students successfully in the past, the world is changing, and along with it, the needs of our youth have evolved. Next Act is incredibly excited to give an updated spin to this impactful program.



So, what’s different? This summer, Next Actors students will be offered the chance to participate in either or both of two shorter, two-week sessions. Participation in either session will also allow participants to take part in our tour week and combined final presentation in July.

During both two-week sessions, participants will take part in workshops with professional artists who will offer training in a variety of skillsets including improvisation, writing, music ensemble, stage lighting, stage combat and more! They will also work together to devise a performance piece to present to friends, family and the community. Prior to the first session, we are also offering an optional after-school Playwriting Workshop. As always, NASTT will be provided to students at no cost. Lunch and snacks will be provided during each program date and bus passes are offered to students who might need them.

If you know of any high school-aged students who are interested in learning more about Next Actors, they can get in touch with Pia Russo, Education Manager, via email at nextactors@gmail.com or by phone at 414.278.7780. Auditions will take place March through May - sign up now!

JUNE 2024

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Optional Playwriting Workshop	3-5pm	3-5pm	3-5pm	3-5pm	3-5pm	
	10	11	12	13	14	
Session One	17	18	19	20	21	
	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	
	24	25	26	27	28	29
	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	Session One Presentation

JULY 2024

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	
Session Two	8	9	10	11	12	
	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	
Tour Week	15	16	17	18	19	20
	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	Session Two Presentation
	22	23	24	25	26	27
	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	9am-3pm	Combined Finale Presentation

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The Rural Landscapes of **Susan Hale** by Jim Toth, Curator



Cherry Hill Spring

The Midwest is too often dismissed as “fly-over country.” Even on the ground, our rural landscapes (for many) are just boring stretches of the interstate to endure going from city to city. How sad. I have always found our rural, pastoral landscapes to be rich environments, full of interesting contours, textures and subtle colorations. Taking the time to get off the fast track and onto our county roads is the way to go. Slowing down, we can appreciate the unique beauty of Wisconsin celebrated by Heidi Armbruster in her play SCARECROW, as well as by our featured artist, **Susan Hale**.

However, “subtle” isn’t a word for Susan’s paintings. Rather, “bold, vibrant and electric” are much more apropos! She provides a description of her work and her artistic sensibilities as follows:

I have always loved to draw and paint. Living in the Wisconsin countryside is a constant inspiration to me. It seems everywhere I look, I see a painting – sunrises on Lake Michigan, golden hay bales scattered in a farm field, popcorn clouds dancing in a cerulean blue sky. Color and pattern are an important aspect of my work. I try to create on the canvas the energy and connection to nature I feel as I paint. Working in oil, I apply the paint thick and luscious, like frosting on a cake. I often say, “Let the paint talk.”

Color is magic to me. My paintings include the vibrant use of color along with a sense of optimism. I love to paint outdoors, “plein-air.” It is invigorating to experience painting not only through my eyes, but also through the feel of the breeze, the smell of the damp earth and the chirping of the crickets. As van Gogh said, “...real artists paint things not as they are, in a dry analytical way, but as they feel them.” I paint as I feel.

People ask me: “Do you really see all those colors in the landscape?” “Yes,” is my reply. “I just squint and use my imagination... isn’t that what being an artist is all about?”

Susan Hale, 2023

I am thrilled to showcase Susan’s exciting paintings and hope they inspire you to take a closer look at our wonderful Wisconsin countryside. You can learn more about Susan and view her portfolio of paintings by visiting her website: <https://www.susanhaleart.com/>.

Sunflower Sunday

Come See Susan's Gallery
Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of SCARECROW, Feb. 21 through Mar. 17 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.

Scan here with your phone to see more of Susan's works!



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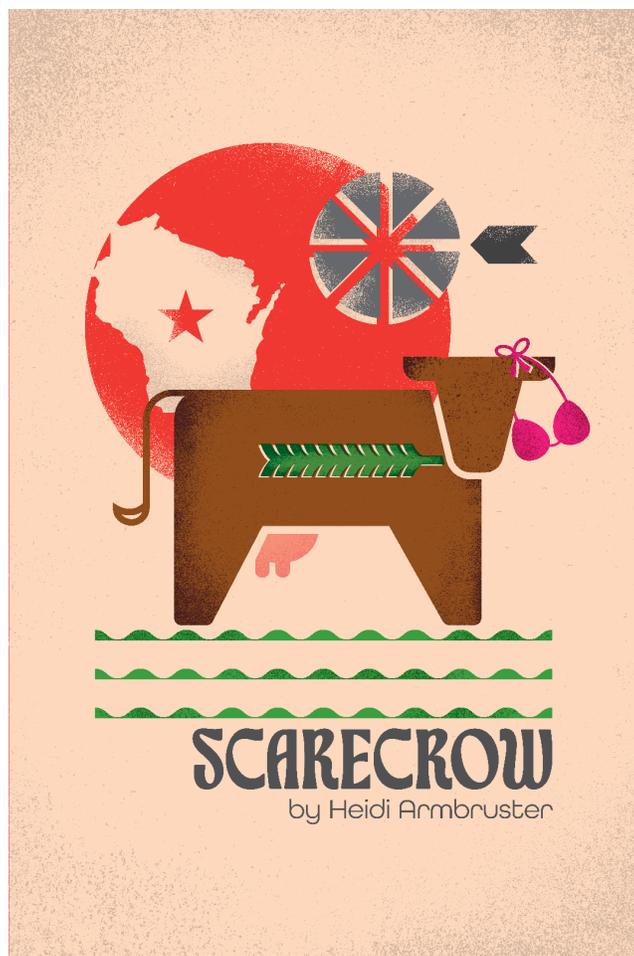
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The Midwest Debut of a Wisconsin-Born Story

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.

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Feb. 21 - Mar. 17, 2024

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			21 Preview 7:30	22 Preview 7:30	23 Opening 7:30	24 4:00 P 7:30
25 2:00 T			28 1:30 7:30	29 7:30 T	1 7:30	2 4:00 7:30
3 2:00 P/T			6 1:30 7:30	7 7:30 T	8 7:30	9 4:00 7:30
10 2:00 P/T	11 PWYC 7:30		13 7:30	14 7:30 T	15 7:30	16 4:00 7:30
17 2:00 Closing	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

Directed by: Laura Gordon
Featuring: Heidi Armbruster
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SCARECROW is sponsored by Bob Balderson