



WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 35, ISSUE 3

FEB 2025

A MARITAL WORKING RELATIONSHIP

MARIE KOHLER AND BRIAN MANI ON COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP AND RETURNING TO NEXT ACT



Brian Mani and Marie Kohler

Marie Kohler and Brian Mani are returning to Next Act Theatre for the first time in a while with *THE CHILDREN*. Brian hasn't appeared at the theatre in 21 years, Marie in 28. We caught up with one of Wisconsin's best-known arts couples to relive memories of Next Act's early days and see what excites them about the return.

What are your memories of the Milwaukee theatre scene in the 1990s?

Brian Mani: We actually met doing a show with Next Generation, which formed into Next Act with [Theatre] Tesseract.

Marie Kohler: So, Next Generation did *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*?

BM: Yeah.

MK: Okay, well, that's where we met, and fell in love, and have not been apart since then. And that was...

BM: '89. So, the year before Next Act.

MK: There was a lot of flux going on at that point. A lot of stuff coming in and out of focus. Chamber Theatre was kind of the most established of the "second tier." Renaissance did not exist quite yet. Next Generation was in flux into Next Act, and it was not clear whether that would work or not. I was still very interested in acting at that point. I was working to get my [Actor's Equity Association] card at that point and would sort of work anywhere to accumulate my hours. I was working at a number of places.

BM: I worked four or five times with Next Act in some of those early years, and I remember pretty much the way it is now, that sometimes you'd get a gig at Chamber, and then sometimes you'd get a gig at Next Act, sometimes you'd get out of town. I would work at Next Act a couple shows almost in a row, and then Chamber would be two or three shows in a row. But for me, once I started at [American Players Theatre], I've worked less and less in Milwaukee proper. It's nice to get back.

Is it correct that you both acted in different productions of *THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE* with Next Act?

MK: Yes, yes. I did one with Jim DeVita, I think David [Cecsarini] directed.

BM: And Jonathan [Smoots].

MK: He was in it, yeah. That was in Centennial Hall at the library.

BM: And when I did it, it was in the Third Ward at the Off-Broadway.

Brian, you did that production with Mary MacDonald Kerr, who is also in *THE CHILDREN*. Have you worked with her since?

BM: This is the first time we've worked together since *THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE*, I think. We did quite a few shows together [before that].

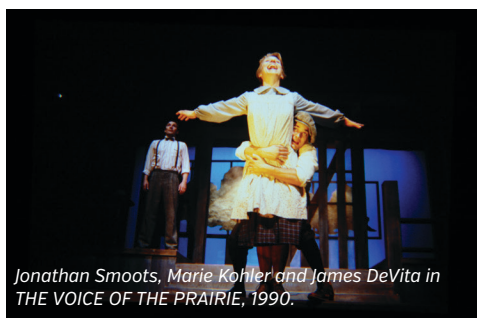
MK: At Renaissance, we hired Mary a lot, so we became good friends too. We all really have good friendships. And then Renaissance gave Mary her first directing opportunity in a reading. And then she got hired by Next Act as a director. So, all those worlds were interconnected at that point, as they still are.

Marie, what was your journey like from wanting to act to being a playwright and director?

MK: The woman who was the Producing Director of Next Generation, Jane Mandel, gave me my first professional writing experience by commissioning me to write an adaptation of *A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST*. And then Next Generation merged right at the time we're talking about, and it got picked up and got produced at Children's Theatre of Madison. Jane was my mentor in that way, in terms of giving me professional opportunities.

When I started working at Renaissance in '95, I really wanted to do more

Continued on page 3.



Jonathan Smoots, Marie Kohler and James DeVita in *THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE*, 1990.



Brian Mani, Matt Tallman and Mary MacDonald Kerr in *THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE*, 2004.

THE CHILDREN is sponsored by Marianne and Sheldon Lubar, Bob Balderson, Judges John and Jean DiMotto, and Susan and Howard Schoenfeld.



Photo: A.J. Magoon

NEXT ACTORS: SUMMER THEATRE FOR TEENS 2025

Next Act Theatre's summer educational program, Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens (NASTT), returns this coming summer! As always, we are excited to offer teens a tuition-free opportunity to develop their theatrical skills and devise a performance piece to share with family, friends and the community.

NASTT is open to all high school students, including incoming freshman and outgoing seniors. Tuition is free, lunch and snacks are provided to all, and bus passes are provided upon request.

This summer's sessions include an Optional Playwriting and Technical Theatre Intensive June 2 - 13, Session One June 16 - 27 and Session 2 July 7 - 18. Participants in either session are also invited to join us for Tour Week July 21 - 24 and the Combined Finale Presentation July 25.

Interested in learning more? Visit nextact.org/nastt for info or to sign up for an audition.

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A MARITAL WORKING RELATIONSHIP continued
playwrighting and asked Renaissance whether they would support that, whether they would be interested in that, and they said yes. So, Renaissance then became my petri dish for becoming more of a playwright.

I shied away from directing for the longest time, but I always had a director's eye to change things, to shape a play. I always had that urge, but I didn't trust myself as having the authority. I directed readings and then dipped my toe in the water with *A PHOENIX TOO FREQUENT* at Renaissance. I honestly did not enjoy it the first time around, I thought, "I am not comfortable. I don't feel secure enough." Renaissance encouraged me. They are a wonderful, collaborative group of women. So, I just kind of very slowly expanded into that, and underneath it, the playwrighting kept on going.

What are you looking forward to about returning to Next Act for *THE CHILDREN*?

MK: First of all, I met Cody and we'd had a couple of conversations in Chicago about getting my plays done down there. I liked him quite a lot. [And after he came up here], he said, "are there plays you're interested in?" This was the first one. I had seen it in Berkeley, California, with a company called the Aurora Theatre Company. I came home and got the script and I've been wanting to do it somewhere. Cody read it and said, "I'd love to get behind this," which was super. It was a super way to make a reentrance as a director in Milwaukee.

BM: It feels great to come back, to come home from rehearsal and the show and get back to my own house. We have a place in Spring Green, but it's like temporary housing for me. This is home. And even though it's still Next Act, it's a brand new theatre [for me]: I've never set foot on this stage before. I can't wait to work with Mary again, it's been 21 years. And Shariba is immensely talented, and we have a lot of friends in common, and I can't wait to work with her. And Marie is the director, and I can't wait to work with her.

MK: And we have done that before. Well, I've written roles for him as a playwright, but the only thing I've directed him in was the *BOSWELL* in Scotland [at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival].

BK: And *HONOUR* [at Renaissance].

MK: Oh! Yes! And *HONOUR*.

BK: The *BOSWELL* in Scotland was sort of co-directed between Laura Gordon and Marie. But we've worked together, with her as a playwright and me as an actor, and I think found pretty early on in our relationship that when we go to see plays, 95 percent of the time, we agree on things.

MK: We're collaborative souls.

**Marie's play, *BOSWELL*, will be produced as part of Next Act Theatre's 2025-26 season, and Brian will appear in it as Samuel Johnson. [For the full season, turn to page 4!]
How are you feeling about that?**

MK: I'm so psyched. And I'm so grateful. Not just that they're doing it, but that Cody thinks it's good. It's nice to be



Josh Krause and Brian Mani in *BOSWELL* Off-Broadway at 59E59.

recognized in your hometown for something you've done elsewhere and to have it come back full-circle. It started at Renaissance, but in a quite different format.

BM: Having taken it to Scotland and New York, there were so many people who knew that it was happening. "Oh my God, are you going to do it here? When is it going to come here?" Hopefully, that desire to see this thing is going to carry over, and to see this hometown show come back home.

MK: And I wrote the role of Samuel Johnson for him. I mean, Johnson is Johnson, he's an incredibly theatrical character. Larger than life. I don't know many actors who could pull that off besides Brian Mani. I mean, he's got the size, he's got the dialect skills – when I say size, not only physical, but also as an actor. Johnson is a monumental character. Oh my God, he's delightful. I couldn't have gotten a better one.

BM: Very excited about Josh [Krause as James Boswell]. He nailed it in New York.

What excites you most about the story of *THE CHILDREN*?

BM: I love the writing in this piece. It's gritty. It's human. There's not a person in it that doesn't have a flaw and not a person in it that's entirely right. It's lovely. The network of relationships is complex and not easy and recognizable. You can go, "I've been through that or I know someone who's gone through that." Of course, set against a nuclear accident like that raises the stakes.

MK: I find that there's hope in it. I know a lot of people, their first reaction when they hear the subject is, "my God, I don't want to sit through that." But it's about human dynamics and taking responsibility. And I feel that it's strongly suggestive that we can. And if we can, we must. And some do. It's more about learning from our mistakes, taking responsibility and moving forward. Learning and relearning the truth. Being accountable. There's hope in that. There's a lesson for all of us, not only in social issues, but in personal issues. Honesty. Accountability to the stakes. Communication. The basic, humanistic values, I feel, are at work in this play. I just think it's a gem.

***THE CHILDREN* runs February 12 through March 9, 2025 at Next Act Theatre. Get tickets now at nextact.org or call (414) 278-0765.**

NEXT ACT THEATRE'S 2025-2026 SEASON

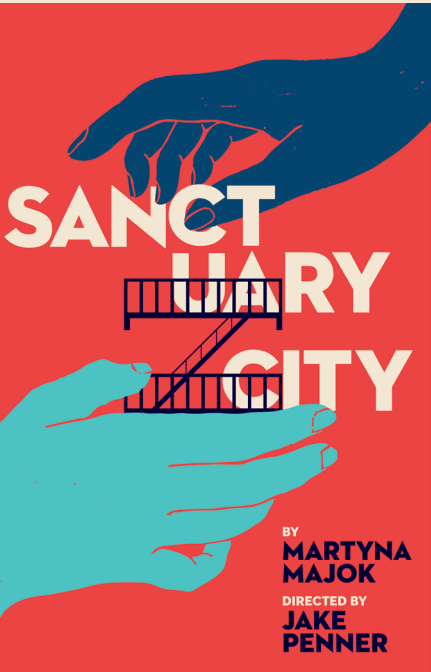
Friends,

We're beyond excited to kick off a season filled with stories that travel far and wide! From the serene beauty of fictional Cardiff Township in Wisconsin's Driftless region, to the buzzing streets of Chicago, Newark, and all the way to Scotland and London, we've got a lineup that's as diverse as it is thrilling. Get ready to have your heartstrings tugged and your imagination stretched with these four exciting plays, never before seen on Wisconsin stages!

Expect stories about love—what it looks like, what it means in the eyes of both individuals and the law. We've got a stunning bio-play from a cherished Milwaukee playwright that will make history leap off the stage, and gripping narratives about life in America's heartland, where people fight to preserve the way of life they hold dear. You'll see how legacy plays out for a celebrity and go on a deep dive to uncover truths in the process.

This season promises something for everyone! As we follow these unforgettable characters, we'll not only see pieces of ourselves, but we'll also gain a greater understanding of one another.

I can't wait to share it all with you!

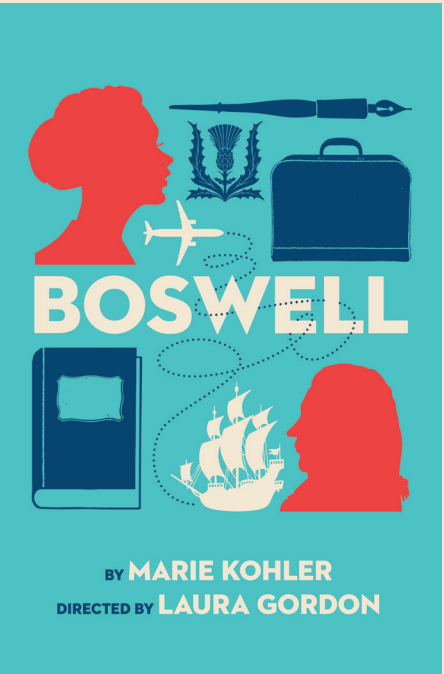


SANCTUARY CITY
BY MARTYNA MAJOK
DIRECTED BY JAKE PENNER
SEPT 10 - OCT 5, 2025

In post-9/11 Newark, NJ, two teenagers brought to America as children now face an impossible question: what are they willing to risk for a future in the only country they've ever known? These two DREAMers and lifelong friends will fight like hell to establish a place for themselves and each other in America. But as time hurtles on and complications mount, each must reckon with the sacrifices it will take in order to find a place to call home.

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BOSWELL
BY MARIE KOHLER
DIRECTED BY LAURA GORDON
NOV 19 - DEC 14, 2025

BOSWELL
BY MARIE KOHLER
DIRECTED BY LAURA GORDON
NOV 19 - DEC 14, 2025

When ambitious 20th-century academic Joan goes looking for unpublished writings by literary giant Samuel Johnson, she finds her work interrupted by James Boswell. Chatty, bawdy, flawed and deeply honest, Boswell's 18th-century journals of his grand journey through Scotland with Johnson take Joan back in time, showing her the power of authenticity and the need to make her own place in the world. Heart and mind spar wittily in this epic adventure of friendship, travel and the written word.

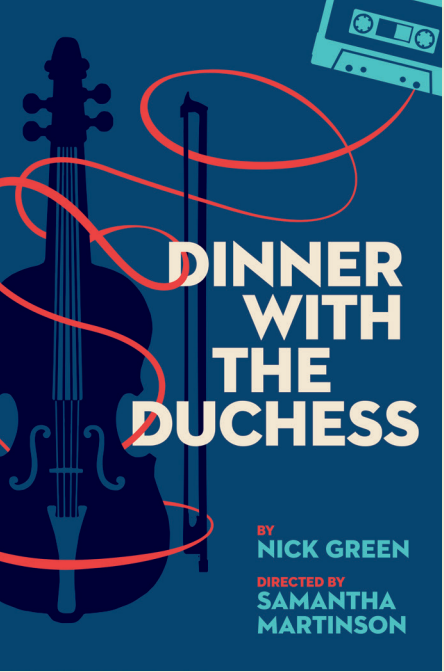
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SWING STATE
BY REBECCA GILMAN
DIRECTED BY CODY ESTLE
FEB 11 - MARCH 8, 2026

It's hard to know who your friends are in a world that's more divided than ever. Recently widowed, Peg tends to the native plants in her 40-acre rural Wisconsin prairie backyard. Her solitary days are interrupted only by visits from Ryan, a family friend with a checkered past. When a mysterious theft alerts the authorities, a string of events unfold that forever changes their lives and their community. Pulitzer Prize finalist Rebecca Gilman questions how we help each other when it feels like our way of life is in danger of disappearing.

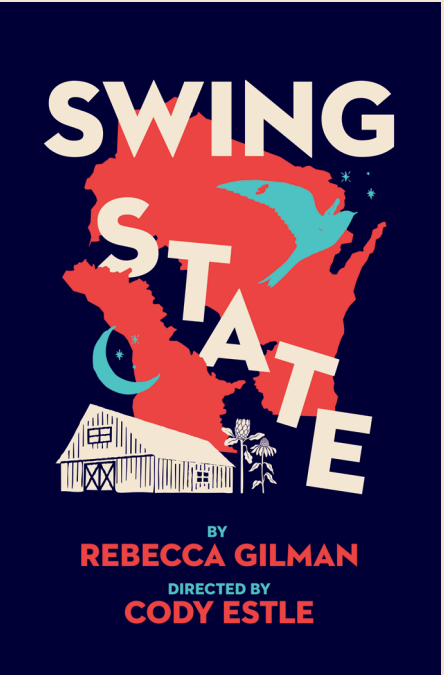
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DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS
BY NICK GREEN
DIRECTED BY SAMANTHA MARTINSON
APRIL 22 - MAY 17, 2026

At the end of a storied career, violin virtuoso Margaret gives her final interview to a young reporter. As the evening wears on, Margaret must confront secrets and ghosts of the past to face an impossible question: how will she be remembered? Boundaries are drawn, lines are crossed and tensions reach a crescendo as a simple dinner becomes a battleground in the fight for the truth. Nick Green's tense, personal drama explores whether the artist or her art defines a legacy.

FEATURING LAURA GORDON
MORE CASTING TO BE ANNOUNCED!



LEAVING YOUR MARK

WHAT IS THE CHARLES D. KAKUK LEGACY SOCIETY AND WHY SHOULD YOU CONSIDER JOINING IT?



By Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager

Named for the late Charles D. Kakuk, long-time Next Act Theatre Managing Director, Next Act's **Legacy Society** recognizes individuals who have made a lasting impact on Next Act Theatre through generous planned giving. Bequests received from Legacy Society members go towards an endowment that will continue to support Next Act's mission to provide intimate and thought-provoking theatre to Milwaukee audiences for many years to come.

Legacy Society members receive a variety of benefits, including:

- Exclusive invitations to behind-the-scenes events, including first rehearsal celebrations for each Next Act production
- A voucher for two free drinks at every Next Act performance at our lobby bar, "Charles' Place"
- Your name listed as a member of the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society in playbills and on Next Act's website (if you wish)

There are a variety of ways to join the Legacy Society and secure the future of Next Act for years to come. Some options include designating a gift in your will, setting up a Charitable Remainder Trust, designating Next Act as a life insurance beneficiary or including Next Act in other retirement plans.

Next Act will be holding a luncheon to share information about the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society on **Tuesday, March 4th, at 11:00 AM**. If you are interested in attending the luncheon or learning more about joining the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society, please reach out to Development Manager Tawnie Thompson at tawnie@nextact.org or at [414] 278-7780, ext. 7.

Thanks to the generous support of current members of the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society:

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By James Toth, Curator

*The characters in **THE CHILDREN*** are faced with the existential dilemma that because we are free, we are also inherently responsible. Their struggle to accept or reject their responsibility for past and future actions is a stark and potentially lonely condition that is reflected in the paintings of our featured artist, Mohammad N. ElBsat.

Through his use of layered, contrasting colors and textures with embedded human figures, his work captures the depth and fragility of the human condition in all its ambiguity. Sometimes bold and hopeful, other times muted with almost hidden figures, his large canvases engage the viewer in unexpected ways. In his words: "My aim is to evoke a personal and emotional response, encouraging introspection and empathy." The answers to our existential struggles are rarely black and white, nor is the art of ElBsat.

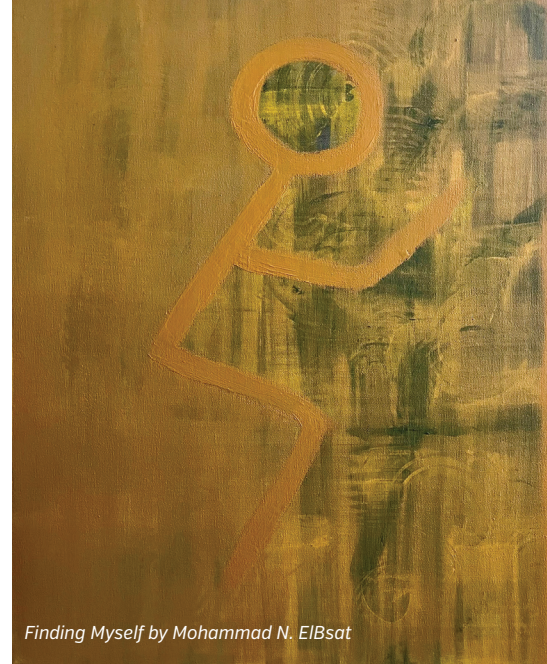


Mohammad N. ElBsat is a Milwaukee-based artist, actor and engineer originally from Saida, Lebanon who has a special relationship with Next Act Theatre. Behind the scenes he serves on

its Board of Directors and on stage he has appeared in a number of Next Act Theatre productions as well as with many other Milwaukee theatre companies. By day he applies his 2012 Marquette University Ph.D in Electrical Engineering to the field of energy optimization in which he holds several engineering patents.

Come See Mohammad's Gallery

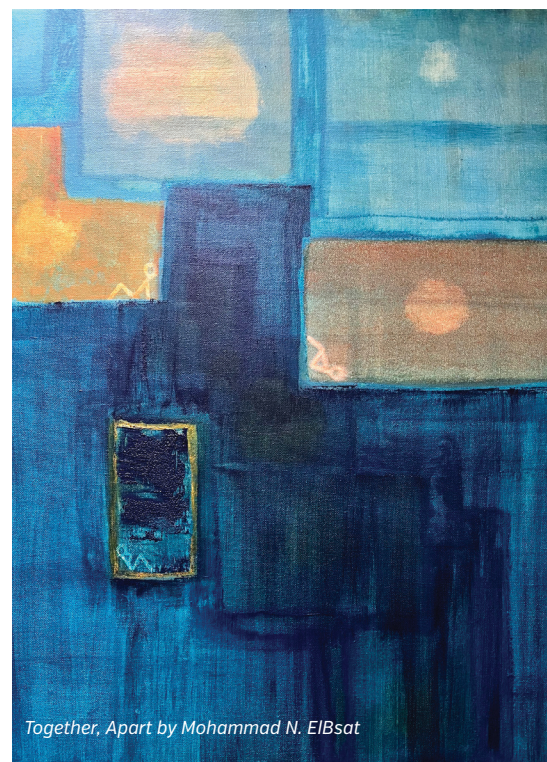
Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of **THE CHILDREN**, February 12 through March 9 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.



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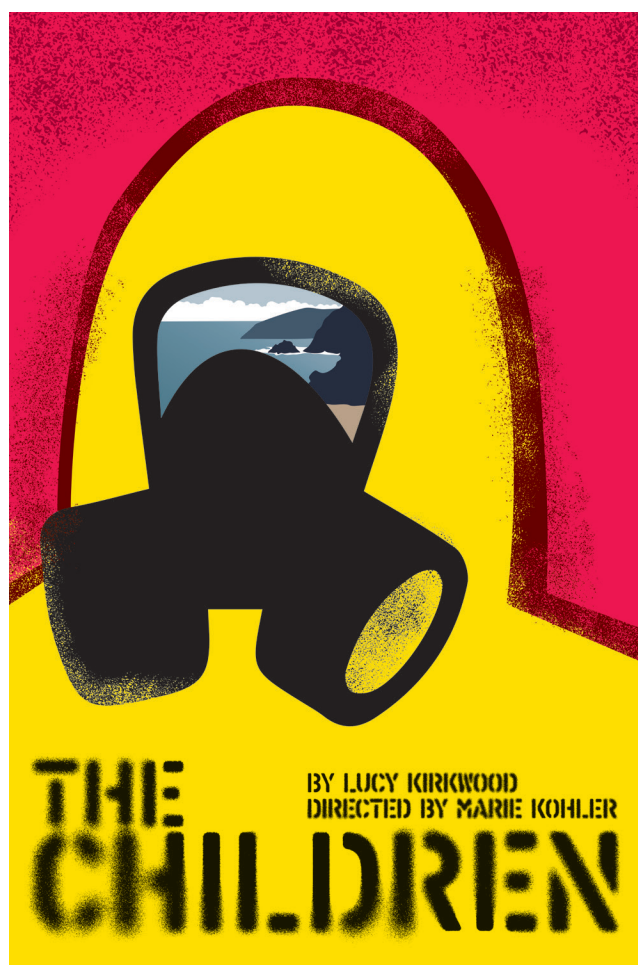
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"... a richly suggestive and beautifully written piece of work... Kirkwood is the most rewarding dramatist of her generation." -The Independent

"Kirkwood plays a clever and ultimately heartbreaking game with the complex relationships among these three old friends." -Variety

Feb 12 - Mar 9, 2025

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			FEB 12 Preview 7:30	13 Preview 7:30	14 Opening 7:30	15 4:00 P
16 2:00 T			19 1:30 7:30	20 7:30 T	21 7:30	22 4:00
23 2:00 P/T			26 1:30 7:30	27 7:30 T	28 7:30	MAR 1 4:00
2 2:00 P/T	3 PWYC 7:30		5 1:30 7:30	6 7:30 T	7 7:30	8 4:00
9 Closing 2:00	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

Directed by: Marie Kohler

Featuring: Mary MacDonald Kerr, Brian Mani and Shariba Rivers

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