

WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 35, ISSUE 4
APR 2025

THE YEAR OF TAMI WORKENTIN

ONE OF MILWAUKEE'S BUSIEST ARTISTS TALKS ACTING, PLAYWRIGHTING AND OTHER CREATIVE ENDEAVORS

Tami Workentin returns to Next Act as the character Marty in *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION*, but that's just the tip of the iceberg: in the 2025-26 season, she will appear in Next Act's production of *SWING STATE*, and alongside her husband James Pickering in her self-written *GEORGE & GRACIE: A LOVE STORY* at Milwaukee Rep (among other projects!) We sat down with Tami to see how she's getting ready for a busy year of theatre.

What excites you about *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION*?

[Playwright Annie Baker] has a style to her. *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION* has pauses, and silences, and long pauses – you're given rules for how that applies. You have to log where silences or pauses are, and you also have to take the pearls with you – “what is your storytelling in that area?” We often sit in a circle, so who's going to see what? So, as an audience member, you may walk away with different takes on the individual stories.

What's also important is that it's not a movie. You've got to know what's going on in my head. There's got to be a tell theatrically.

What I love about this play is that everybody comes with a need. Marty comes with a

need because she's wanted to do this course for years. I can imagine her looking up her Viola Spolin games. Then, she's going to have an expectation for how she thinks it goes over, so she's going to have successes and disappointments along the way. But then you have these other characters walk in, only one of which really has any theatre experience, because it's in a community center with adult actors. And adults stepping into an education setting is always scary because you wonder if you can still learn something, and you have no idea what's going to be asked of you. You have all these different people discover something about themselves. What I love is that they come in, and they change when they leave. It's going to be a lot of fun.

It's also a really smart, creative group of people. It's going to be something very different than what I've ever done in my career. It's not for the faint of heart. What will look very simple will have had a lot of talking and thought process going through it. It's truly an ensemble piece; I love that. It's Marty's play inasmuch that she teaches the class, but it's a story about everybody.

I loved the premise of a woman teaching an adult drama class at a

Kristin E. Ellis and Tami Workentin in *PIPELINE*. Photo by Lily Shea.



community center: when you say that to me, my little brain goes, “how fun would that be!”

And then you're back at Next Act next season playing Peg in *SWING STATE*. What drew you to that project?

What I love about it is that the title suggested something different than what the play turns out to be. I love the idea of this woman at a hinge moment in her life – that's when the best playwriting happens. She's really questioning what her lineage is going to be. She's lost her husband, she has no children, and their relationship to the land in the Driftless region is about keeping all of the native plants there. That's cool. The Driftless region is such an interesting area in Wisconsin. There are a lot of artists out there.

I love that she was an educator and

Continued on page 3.



CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION is sponsored by J. Michael Reavis, Sandra Zingler and John McGivern

SPOTLIGHT ON MARIANNE ROBBINS

MEET OUR NEWEST BOARD MEMBER! By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director, and Marianne Robbins

Next Act Theatre is excited to introduce the newest member of our Board of Directors: Marianne Robbins. Read on to learn more about who she is and what she brings to the Next Act community.



I grew up in Chicago and New York. I went to Swarthmore College and taught school in Philadelphia before going to law school at Northeastern University. I came to Milwaukee in 1977 and represented unions and individuals, becoming a partner at the Previant Law Firm, where I met my husband Matt. We raised our two children Lydia and George in the Sherman Park neighborhood.

I was introduced to Next Act Theatre through two of our union clients, David Newby, and Milan and Gordana Racic. Through the years, we became season ticket holders and contributors. I enjoy introducing the theater to friends, just as I was introduced to it by the Newbys and the Racics.

As part of the Next Act board, I hope to become more of a part of the vibrant arts culture here in Milwaukee by contributing to and working with all the people who make the great plays we see happen.

This season, I especially enjoyed THE CHILDREN and LOVE/SICK (which was done as a reading); last season, my favorites were SCARECROW and THE TREASURER.

I love to walk my new neighborhood of Bay View, putting up posters for each Next Act play; as well as seeing the Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens productions.

WE WANT YOU!

Next Act Theatre is looking for more passionate patrons and theatre lovers like Marianne to join our Board of Directors. Board members support our stated mission by overseeing and augmenting the organization's fiscal health, and acting as a liaison between the Next Act and the community. In return, you receive access to behind-the-scenes events and get to know that you're ensuring the future success of our company! Get involved! **Contact Managing Director Libby Amato at libby@nextact.org or (414) 278-7780 to start the application process.**

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Design by A.J. Magoon

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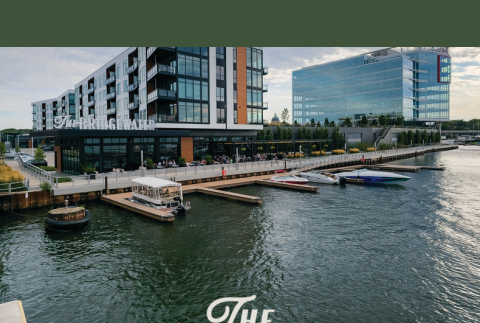
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THE YEAR OF TAMI WORKENTIN, continued
that she is looking to pass on [her knowledge] to this guy who hasn't found his landing yet. How that has become an important relationship to her. The young cop comes into the show and they realize that they'd been teacher and student. She has an adversarial relationship with the other cop because [that cop is part of] the farm family that's threatening [my character's] land. We're all feeling different things that way. I come from a family of farmers. It's fascinating.

I also love that this play takes off in another direction that you don't expect it to go. It will surprise you. It's fun. Rebecca Gilman's a great playwright, and she lives in the Driftless region, so how wonderful that this play would be done in Wisconsin.

You're doing both **CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION** and **SWING STATE** with **Elyse Edelman**. Have you worked much with her otherwise?

We knew each other in passing. We kind of decided we needed to get to know one another, so I went to her house for cocktails and hula hooping. And I would like to say that I am the key to how she has conquered the hula hoop. I would like that in print.

Tell us about **GEORGE & GRACIE: A LOVE STORY**. How did that come to be?

I looked at Jim and I, and I thought, "we are like George [Burns] and Gracie [Allen]." I really felt like I wanted to write something for us. Certainly as you get older, those roles diminish, particularly for women. I watched other people take a hold of that. It's interesting, because when you're 63, you decide at a point whether to settle into what you know and let that be, or do you say to yourself, "why don't I try something that might scare me?" My idea in my head wasn't that I would fail, my idea in my head was that I would succeed.

I have a colleague named Wolfe Bowart from SpoonTree Productions. He is a physical comedian. And I reached out to him, and I said, "I have this idea." I've always wanted to find a way to work together.

GEORGE & GRACIE is about words. Wolfe's work is about not using words. [I wondered] how can these marry? He said, "if you had to do an elevator pitch, how would you do an elevator pitch to, say, a 7-year-old, a



James Pickering and Tami Workentin in THE SECRET MASK. Photo by Ross Zentner.

CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION
by Annie Baker

NEXT ACT THEATRE
255 S. Water St.
Milwaukee, WI 53204

APR. 23 - MAY 18, 2025

TICKETS:
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20-year-old, a 40-year-old and a 70-year-old?" Because the 7-year-old won't know who Gracie is, neither will the 20-year-old and maybe [not] a lot of 40-year-olds.

When you write about biographies, you can be stuck in the world of biography. And you're tethered too tightly to it, feeling as if you can only tell that story. You can't go off on "what-ifs." I thought, what if I write about the perspective of George going on stage the first time after Gracie died as a single performer? Now, historically, he went on to perform with other people while she was still alive. Doesn't matter. Now, I can make this shit up. Very little is written about Gracie's inner monologue, what she thinks, outside of what George writes about her. So, I have to make some of that up.



We said please and thank you. We liked one another. We respected one another." If it's too much work, then it becomes a job. Who wants that? I want to celebrate marriage. I want to celebrate it.

This is an event on a night that doesn't ask a lot of you. It's sweet. It's funny.

Enjoy Tami Workentin on stage in **CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION** April 23 - May 18, and see her in **Next Act Theatre** and **Milwaukee Rep's 25-26 seasons**. More info at nextact.org or milwaukeeep.com.

IN WITH THE NEW (AND THE FAMILIAR, TOO!)

BY A.J. MAGOON, MARKETING DIRECTOR



Next Act Theatre's 2025-26 Season is fresh, exciting and new! That starts with the plays Artistic Director Cody Estle has selected: *SANCTUARY CITY* by Martyna Majok, *BOSWELL* by Marie Kohler and *SWING STATE* by Rebecca Gilman are all **Wisconsin Premieres**, and *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS* by Nick Green is a **U.S. Premiere**! We're excited to bring you the Next Act debuts of a slew of artists as well: in *SANCTUARY CITY*, director **Jake Penner** and actors **King Hang**, **Joe Lino** and **Ashley Oviedo**; in *BOSWELL*, actors **Madeline Calais-King** and **Sarah Zapiain**; in *SWING STATE*, actors **Jack Lancaster** and **Kelli Strickland** and in *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, director **Samantha Martinson**. Plus, these stories will be brought to life by designers who have never worked in our theatre before, including Sound Designers **Willow James** and **Andre Pluess**, Scenic and Properties Designer **Jody Sekas** and Costume Designer **Misti Bradford**. Across the entire season, Next Act is excited to continue bringing you new stories, new perspectives and new voices to tug your heartstrings, expand your horizons and make you think.

All that newness is perfectly complemented by the familiar aspects of our coming season: artists you'll recognize, whose work you can trust to lift up and tell new stories with talent and skill. *BOSWELL*, for instance, comes to us from beloved local playwright and director **Marie Kohler** and will be directed by **Laura Gordon**. It features familiar faces like **David Cecsarini**, **Heidi Armbruster**, **Brian Mani** and **Josh Krause**. Laura will also appear in *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, her first appearance on our stage in 17 years! *SWING STATE* will reunite **Elyse Edelman** and **Tami Workentin**, who are currently working on *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION* with director and Artistic Director **Cody Estle**. Plus, keep an eye and ear out for the work of designers who have collectively brought dozens of beloved Next Act shows to life, like Costume Designers **Jason Orlenko** and **Izumi Inaba**; Scenic Designers **Jeffrey D. Kmeic**, **Jason Fassl** and **Lisa Schlenker**, Sound Designer **Josh Schmidt**, Lighting Designers **Noele Stollmack** and **Maaz Ahmed**, Properties Designers **Jim Guy** and **Abbey Pitchford**, Intimacy Director **Gaby Labotka**, Stage Manager **Nat Goeller** and more!

You won't want to miss a second of Next Act's fresh, new 2025-26 season! Get your season tickets now - we'll see you at the theatre!

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REMEMBERING JONATHAN SMOOTS

Jonathan Smoots passed away Friday, March 21, following a brief battle with pancreatic cancer. Jonathan was a titan of the Milwaukee theatre scene remembered by audiences and colleagues alike for his enormous stage presence, passionate portrayals of some of the greatest characters in both the classical and contemporary stage canons, and fierce loyalty to, and love for, his friends. For more than 40 years, Milwaukee Rep, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Renaissance Theaterworks, Madison Rep, Next Act and Spring Green's American Players Theatre stages have all been graced by his enduring artistic talent.

In 1990, Jonathan was serving as Artistic Director of Milwaukee's Next Generation Theatre, originally founded by Jane Barclay Mandel, when it merged with Sharon McQueen's Theatre Tesseract to form Next Act Theatre. He served as Next Act's first Artistic Director, guiding the fledgling company for two years before handing over the role to Producing Artistic Director *emeritus* David Cecsarini. Jonathan continued to contribute substantially to Next Act's artistic programming, serving for three years as Artistic Associate, directing 10 of the company's productions and appearing in another 10. Some of his favorite productions at Next Act were his appearances in *SEA MARKS*, *FAITH HEALER* and *EQUIVOCATION*, as well as directing *THE BOYS NEXT DOOR*.

Here was a Caesar; when comes there such another?

Current Next Act Theatre Artistic Director Cody Estle had this to say: "Next Act Theatre was founded 35 years ago by Jonathan Smoots and David Cecsarini, among others, and today, it continues to create exceptional plays for all of us to enjoy. With the passing of Jonathan, Next Act's first artistic director, we reflect on and deeply appreciate the work he and David put into building this company, allowing it to continue producing powerful theatre. I am mindful of the legacy left by those who came before me, and it is an honor to carry the baton they passed down. All of us at Next Act Theatre are keeping Laura Gordon, Jonathan's wife, and David Cecsarini, his best friend, in our thoughts during this time."

Jonathan met David Cecsarini in 1980 at American Players Theatre, and the two quickly became friends and frequent collaborators. David had the following to say:

"Ours was a friendship forged onstage as well as off,

informed as much by Star Trek as it was by Shakespeare. Jonathan's confidence and skill with classical language rubbed off on me and showed me the way forward. As we acted side-by-side in those early APT days, we realized that we shared common, core principles in how we liked to make theatre. Those shared tastes would lead to directing, and eventually to the forming of Next Act Theatre, and all that has come thereafter. We have worked together, learned together, groused together, grown older together and supported one another through thick and thin these past 45 years. Jonathan was one-of-a-kind, to me and to so many others. His absence leaves a hole in our hearts. In the words of Marc Antony: "*Here was a Caesar; when comes there such another?*"

A memorial for Jonathan will be held at Next Act Theatre on Monday, May 5, with refreshments and catered hors d'oeuvres from 6 to 7 p.m. and the memorial starting at 7 p.m. RSVPs to info@nextact.org are encouraged, but not required, by Monday, April 28. Jonathan's family suggests memorial donations to Next Act Theatre or End Of Life Choices, Oregon [EOLCOR].

Jonathan Smoots in *EQUIVOCATION*, 2018. Photo by Ross Zentner.



David Cecsarini and Jonathan Smoots embrace at the Retirement Roast of David Cecsarini, 2022. Photo: Mark Frohna.



Jonathan Smoots and Laura Gordon in *SEA MARKS*, 1991.

BRAVO TO 35 YEARS

BRAVO, NEXT ACT! 2025

THURSDAY, MAY 29 | 5 PM - 9 PM

JOIN NEXT ACT THEATRE

in celebrating the successes of our 2024-25 season and 35 years of intimate, thought-provoking theatre! We will look back at the hard work and artistic success that has brought us to this point while also looking forward: support us as we prepare for another season of engaging artistic and educational programming, with countless more still on the horizon.

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catered by Saz's Hospitality Group, including appetizers, salad, bread service, entrée and dessert. Plus, the first round's on us—all attendees will enjoy one free drink ticket, good for beer or wine, with their admission.

SOME NEXT ACT "GREATS"

A panel featuring Producing Artistic Director *emeritus* **David Cecsarini**, as well as **Carrie Hitchcock**, **Norman Moses**, **Mark Ulrich** and **Tami Workentin** will share behind-the-curtain stories and memories from 35 years of Next Act Theatre, all emceed by **Doug Jarecki**.

Plus, join us in honoring Outstanding Board Member and Supporter **Michael Burzynski** for his years of patronage and service.

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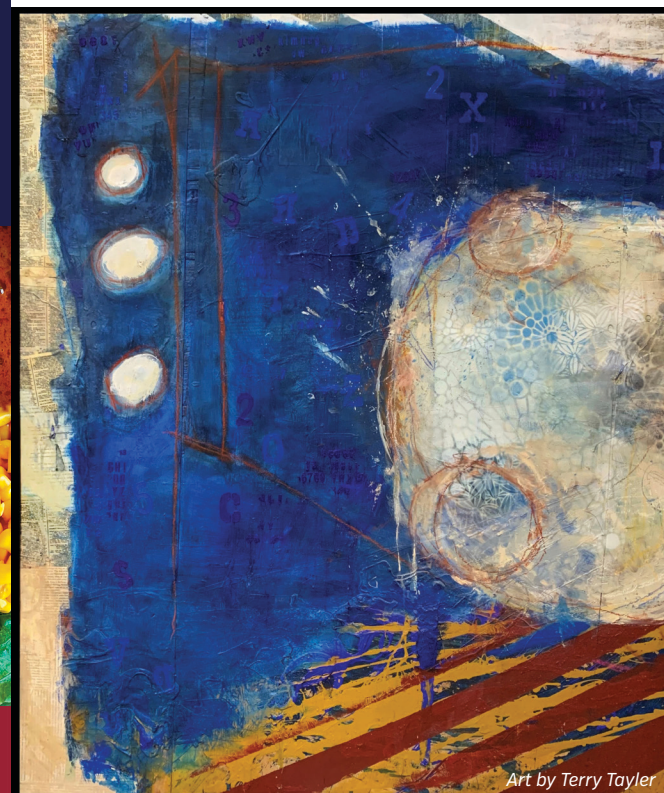
THE MIXED MEDIA OF TERRY TAYLER

By James Toth, Curator

Art by Terry Tayler



Art by Terry Tayler



Art by Terry Tayler

Artistic expression takes many forms. From abstract scratchings on paper to hyper realistic paintings and sculptures, we humans are creatively unrelenting! While I admire, appreciate and even envy the skill shown in very realistic depictions, I find myself drawn to more non-representational, expressive work for its openness to personal interpretation. I also appreciate the creative process of discovery that drives the making of such art. While the realistic painter has a clear vision of their completed piece, the abstract artist is guided by their process with a limited sense of the final result. And so it is with our featured artist Terry Tayler, *and* with the dramatic acting exercises portrayed in the play *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION* by Annie Baker. Both start within a proscribed structure, be it a rectangular canvas or a set of "rules", but the outcomes for both are unpredictable and often with dramatic personal revelations. I invite you to dive into Terry's layered compositions to find what he may reveal about himself and perhaps you.

Terrence Tayler is a mixed media artist born and raised in Wauconda, Illinois. He is now currently based out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin working on multiple different series in a variety of sizes and mediums. Tayler graduated from The Peck School of the Arts at UWM with a degree in Fine Art and Art History and Criticism.

Terry's Website



Terry's Instagram



Terry's Gallery



Come See Terry's Gallery

Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION*, April 23 through May 18 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.

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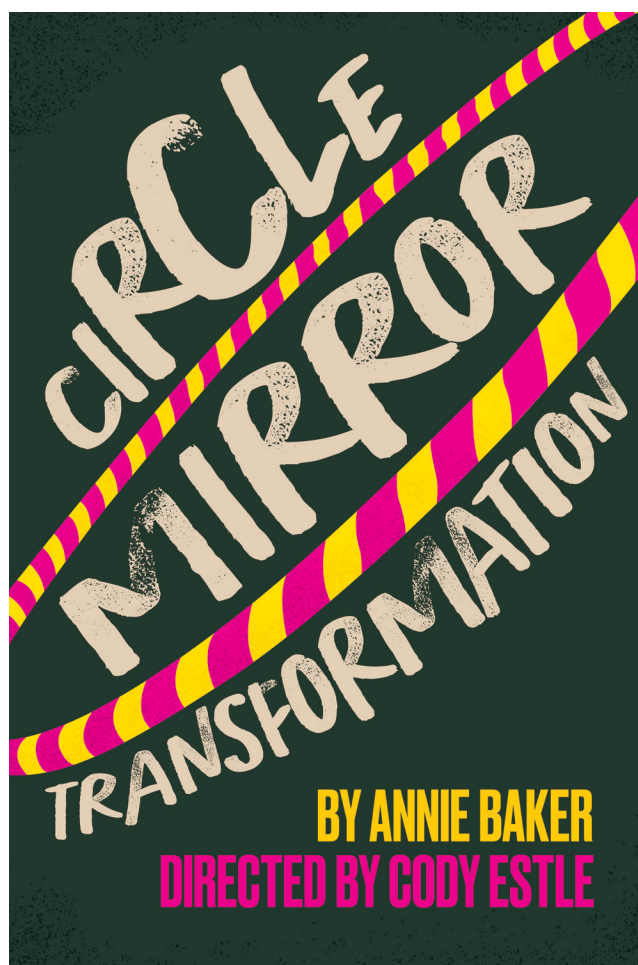
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"Annie Baker's play is an absolute feast. CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION is the kind of unheralded gem that sends people into the streets babbling and bright-eyed with the desire to spread the word." -The New York Times

April 23 - May 18, 2025

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			APR 23 Preview 7:30	24 Preview 7:30	25 Opening 7:30	26 4:00 P
27 2:00 T			30 1:30 7:30	MAY 1 7:30 T	2 7:30	3 4:00
4 2:00 P/T			7 1:30 7:30	8 7:30 T	9 7:30	10 4:00
11 2:00 P/T	12 PWYC 7:30		14 1:30 7:30	15 7:30 T	16 7:30	17 4:00
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