

# WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 36, ISSUE 1  
SEPTEMBER 2025

## SURVIVAL IS COMPLICATED

### OVERSTUDY AND UNDERSTUDY DISCUSS THEIR ROLES IN *SANCTUARY CITY*

*During each production at Next Act Theatre, more than one person prepares to take on a role. All shows have an overstudy—the actor who plays a role each night—and their understudy, who prepares to go on if the overstudy cannot. In *SANCTUARY CITY*, Ashley Oviedo plays G, while Patricia León de la Barra understudies the role. We sat down with both of them to talk about the play, the role and how their life experience informs their approach to this play.*

#### What draws you to a play like *SANCTUARY CITY*?

**Ashley Oviedo:** What draws me to a play like *SANCTUARY CITY* is essentially the same thing that draws me to music and dance! I love telling stories, and from the time I was eight years old, it's what I have always loved to do. I love knowing that I can create meaningful art through song or dance, but I especially love when a piece speaks to me personally. For me, it's about the feeling I get as an artist when a song, dance, musical or play resonates with me as a person!

#### Are there things that you feel personally connect you to G? If so, what are they?

##### Patricia León de la Barra:

As a Venezuelan international student, opportunities to inhabit a character whose story echoes my own are rare. I first played her [as a student at Marquette

University] during the closing months of the 2024 election. In many ways, G carried me through the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's second win, and she continues to accompany me now as I revisit her a year later.

Like G, I grew up in a violent and volatile home, and I know what it means to have to fight to survive and to love in the midst of instability. While I have always held privileges that G initially did not—being able to study here, for instance—the weight of her story still resonates within me. I resonate with her especially in this political moment, when immigration crackdowns are reshaping lives in America, just as I resonate with her through the memory of growing up in Venezuela under [Venezuelan Presidents] Chávez and Maduro, when protests, disappearances and economic crises were part of daily life.

I also find myself connecting deeply with the “uglier” sides of G: her lashing out, her distrust of others, her immense capacity to hurt the very people she loves. Those are impulses I recognize in myself, born of growing up in environments where safety could not be assumed and trust was dangerous. What I love about *SANCTUARY CITY* is that it does not condemn her for this. Instead, it frames her anger, her harshness and her contradictions in a sympathetic light. The play insists that survival is complicated, that love and harm can live side by side, and that those who endure instability should be seen not just for their wounds but for their humanity.

G's story is not mine, but it lives very close to my marrow. That is why I carry her with me.

#### Does the way the first half of the play is presented change how you think about your role, memorize, rehearse?

**AO:** For plays that have this specific structure; time jumps, quick scene cuts, *et cetera*, I usually like to focus on memorizing the throughline of the play itself! Of course, you always have to know the sequence of events in a play as an actor, but for this play specifically, I am focusing more than usual on



Ashley Oviedo

Patricia León de la Barra

*Continued  
on page 2*

*SANCTUARY CITY* is supported by Producing Sponsor J. Michael Reavis, Associate Sponsor Patty Compton and Co-Sponsors Derin Bjugstad and David Paris, Elizabeth Elving, and Sandy Laedtke

## SURVIVAL IS COMPLICATED, continued

remembering and figuring out exactly why the scenes are ordered the way they are, and that usually helps me remember! Rehearsal helps me a lot too! Once I get the show in my body, it's honestly hard to forget... even after a few weeks of having closed a show!

### What is the difference between preparing to perform the role and preparing to understudy it?

**PL:** Preparing to understudy the role is a different kind of discipline than preparing to perform it. As an understudy, I want to hold the character in my mind and body while also honoring Ashley's process and choices. It requires flexibility and an attention to detail that is just as rigorous as performing, but in a quieter, more adaptive way. There is something both daunting and liberating about knowing I must be ready to step in at a moment's notice, while also supporting the work happening onstage from the wings.

### What do you think is the role of a play like *SANCTUARY CITY* in our modern society?

**AO:** To, on one hand, give a voice to every story that either never gets told, or is told in a one-sided way, and by doing that, inspire empathy and community not just in the groups of people that the play is written about, but everyone in between.

**PL:** To me, the role of *SANCTUARY CITY* is to remind us that immigration is never just an abstract policy debate. It is a lived experience. The text is an unsentimental yet deeply empathetic portrait of how real, complicated lives are shaped by laws that rarely leave space for nuance or humanity.

Policy is blunt: it cannot hold the contradictions that make up a person's life. This play does.

In an era where immigration discourse is weaponized for political gain, *SANCTUARY CITY* insists on the specificity of human experience. It asks audiences to sit with the ways in which status dictates the possibilities of love, trust and survival. And it does this without romanticizing its characters: B and G are allowed to be flawed. It shows us that immigrants do not need to be perfect, virtuous angels in order to be

deserving of dignity and respect.

I think that's the vital role of theatre in moments like these—to resist flattening, to complicate, and to demand empathy without sentimentality. *SANCTUARY CITY* argues for seeing the people whom



King Hang and Ashley Oviedo rehearsing *SANCTUARY CITY* at Next Act Theatre, 2025  
Photo by A.J. Magoon

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**What's Next** is a publication of Next Act Theatre

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immigration policies most affect. In a time of immigration crackdowns and increasingly rigid definitions of belonging, the play makes visible the cost of those abstractions on people's real, tangible lives.

**Despite being set in 2001, what makes this play still relevant in 2025?**

**PL:** The play's relevance is undeniable in 2025, as the president's renewed immigration crackdowns deliberately target migrants—raiding, detaining, and even kidnapping people with no criminal record. *SANCTUARY CITY* shows how policies that seem abstract on paper devastate real lives, dictating who gets to feel safe, who gets to love freely, and who is forced into impossible choices. Though set in the early 2000s, its story mirrors today's reality: a nation still denying immigrants' belonging.

**What excites you the most about *SANCTUARY CITY*? What scares or challenges you the most?**

**AO:** What excites me the most about *SANCTUARY CITY* is the same thing as what scares me the most about it: as soon as I read the play, I had a very personal connection to it. Those are some of the most rewarding projects to work on as an artist, and I couldn't wait to start in the months leading up to rehearsals. That same thing can also be a little scary, though. For every reason you can imagine, it's a very vulnerable thing to put stories that feel so close to your own up [on stage] every night for friends, family and strangers to see.

**What do you hope audience members take away from this play?**

**PL:** I think *SANCTUARY CITY* exists to show a microcosm of what is, in many ways, the American story. It is about the compromises, sacrifices and acts of love that survival demands, and how those choices are shaped by forces far larger than the individuals who must endure them. For immigrant audiences, I hope there is recognition and admiration for the characters' perseverance—for the way they continue to build lives and sustain hope even in systems designed to break them down.

For LGBTQ+ audiences, I hope the play's exploration of chosen family, loyalty and the difficult negotiation of love feels both validating and expansive. I hope there is resonance in B's relationship with Henry, which unravels under the weight of laws that deny their love legitimacy. They can't marry; they can't build a future together; and ultimately, they're forced into a choice where love itself becomes a site of resentment. That struggle—of love colliding with systemic exclusion—is one that queer

communities know intimately, and I think the play honors that history with empathy.

For all audiences, my hope is that they leave understanding that immigration and queerness are not abstract issues; they are lived in bodies, in relationships, in private moments of trust and betrayal.

**Patricia, what does it mean to be studying and performing in the United States right now?**

**PL:** I am afraid. For the first time since I moved to the States, I have not been able to go home and visit my family. This is the longest stretch of time I have ever gone without seeing my own mother. But I carry with me the immense sacrifices my parents have made to support my education at Marquette, and to only talk about this fear would be a disservice to their investment.

Despite the current political climate, I have found an incredible support network here in Milwaukee. Studying and performing here right now means honoring those sacrifices by giving my full presence and dedication to the work, even while navigating fear and distance. I am grateful to my mentors, especially [Next Act Administrative and Artistic Manager] Caroline Norton, Marquette Theatre faculty, the directors who have trusted me with opportunities, and my friends—who are all American, all amazing people—who have helped me navigate the stressors of living abroad. Thanks to their support, I feel welcomed, seen and loved, and that sense of belonging has allowed me to continue to take risks as an artist, even in a time of uncertainty.

**What do you think is the role of hope in the arts right now?**

**AO:** The role that hope serves in art today is to create a sense of calm, love and understanding among people. Art serves as a mirror so much of the time; it shows us our flaws and the things we may be avoiding in our own hearts. Art gives us the opportunity to sit with those difficult things and hope to be better as individuals and a society. Hope is the "why?" in my opinion. Why we choose to tell difficult and sometimes uncomfortable stories as artists, and why we choose to sit and listen as audience members.

**PL:** To persevere.

**Anything else you'd like audiences to know about this play?**

**PL:** Once, I overheard someone immediately dismiss [this play], saying it sounded "too sad." I think that reaction is telling, and exactly why we need plays like this. Audiences shouldn't shy away from stories because they carry pain or tragedy; that pain is part of the truth. At the same time, *SANCTUARY CITY* is not only a story of hardship. It is also full of love, joy and survival. It shows the beauty and humor that exist even in the harshest circumstances, and the ways people fight to hold on to each other despite everything stacked against them.

I hope this play cracks people's hearts open the way it did mine.

*SANCTUARY CITY* runs September 10 through October 5, 2025 at Next Act Theatre. Get tickets now at [nextact.org](http://nextact.org) or call (414) 278-0765.

# WE'RE THREE QUARTERS THROUGH NEXT ACT THEATRE'S

## NEXT BIG THING

### CAMPAIGN

By Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager

**Starting on July 1, 2025**, with the support of long-time patrons **Val and Gary Zamecnik**, Next Act launched our Next Big Thing Matching Campaign! Val and Gary Zamecnik have generously offered to match donations to Next Act up to

# \$50,000

We're excited to report that as of September 3, we're already **past the 75-percent marker** of our \$50,000 goal! With the help of more than fifty incredible donors (listed below), we are well on our way to finishing the campaign in half the time.

The funding will support the renovation of our rehearsal hall, which will be renamed the **Val and Gary Zamecnik Studio**.

The floors will be replaced, a new ceiling lighting grid will be installed and a variety of other updates will be made to support our rehearsal processes, First Rehearsal Celebrations, Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens Program and the many community partners who share our space.

The Zamecniks' match also allows for the acquisition of a new, modern lighting board and other equipment upgrades so that we can continue producing the intimate, thought-provoking work that you love to see on our stage. Plus, the funds you contribute will go directly to making our 2025-26 productions possible!

With just under \$12,000 left to raise before **December 31**, every dollar counts! You can bring us closer to our goal with a donation of any size.

Visit [nextact.org/donate](https://nextact.org/donate), call **(414) 278-0765** or mail a donation to:

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(Updated September 3, 2025)

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Questions? Contact Development Manager Tawnie Thompson at (414) 278-7780 x7 or [tawnie@nextact.org](mailto:tawnie@nextact.org)

# MORE TO CONSIDER

By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

**Next Act's brand of powerful theatre** frequently brings audiences face-to-face with important issues. If you're a frequent Next Act patron, we know you probably want plays that make you think, feel and talk about a variety of topics.

While our shows are a great jumping-off point into the issues we're exploring, there are ways to go deeper! One way is this newsletter, as well as our newly-introduced audience guide, which is available digitally on the Next Act website and in print in our lobby before each performance. But we'd also like to invite you to be a bigger part of the conversation!

Before select performances of each play, we offer **Personal Previews**. These conversations, featuring a guest from the current production, are moderated by a Next Act staff member and give patrons additional context and insight about a play before the performance. We allow both time for the guest to share thoughts and also time for patrons to ask questions. Personal Previews happen 30 minutes before curtain time of our Sunday Matinees (except Closing Sunday). For *SANCTUARY CITY*, we are excited to have Director **Jake Penner** and understudy (and Venezuelan international student, see the full story on pages 1 - 3) **Patricia León de la Barra** as our guests.

Then, following each Sunday Matinee (except Closing Sunday) and Thursday Evening (except Thursday Preview) performance, Next Act also offers a **Talkback**. At our Talkbacks, audience members are encouraged to remain after a performance to talk with cast members about the play - both the experience of performing the play itself as well as the topics and issues raised. For *SANCTUARY CITY*, we are also excited to welcome guests from several community organizations to provide additional thoughts, reactions and context for both audience members and cast members.

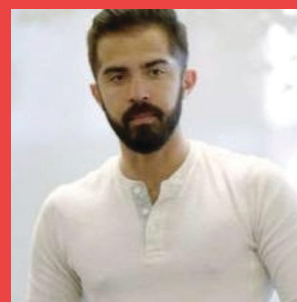
One of our community partners, the **American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin** (ACLU WI), fights to protect, defend and expand civil rights and liberties - particularly for communities historically denied their rights - through nonpartisan advocacy, community education, litigation and organizing in order to create a more just future.

Our other community partner, the **Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee**, provides legal services at no cost to more than 6,000 eligible individuals and families each year. Legal Aid specializes in civil matters involving housing security, guardianship, consumer protection, financial health, civil rights and immigration, enabling clients to redevelop and strengthen their communities from within.

Interested in having a more involved role in the conversation around *SANCTUARY CITY*? Check out the schedule below and attend a performance -and supplementary event[s]-on your desired day!

Personal Previews	Talkbacks
Sunday, September 14 - 1:30 p.m. Jake Penner <i>[Director]</i>	Sunday, September 14 - after show ACLU WI, Legal Aid Society
	Thursday, September 18 - after show ACLU WI
Sunday, September 21 - 1:30 p.m. Patricia León de la Barra <i>[Understudy]</i>	Sunday, September 21 - after show ACLU WI, Legal Aid Society
	Thursday, September 25 - after show ACLU WI, Legal Aid Society
Sunday, September 28 - 1:30 p.m. Jake Penner <i>[Director]</i>	Sunday, September 28 - after show ACLU WI, Legal Aid Society
	Thursday, October 2 - after show ACLU WI, Legal Aid Society

## PERSONAL PREVIEW GUESTS



**JAKE PENNER**  
DIRECTOR



**PATRICIA LEÓN DE LA BARRA**  
UNDERSTUDY

## TALKBACK GUESTS

**ACLU**  
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION  
**Wisconsin**



# MEET OUR NEW TEAM MEMBERS

*Over the summer, Next Act Theatre welcomed two new members to our administrative staff. Join us in giving a warm welcome to two new faces around the building!*

## **Elyse Edelman has joined Next Act** as our **Artistic Associate**.

Elyse is a Milwaukee-based freelance actor, director, and educator. She has previously been seen on the Next Act stage in *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION* and a staged reading of *MRS. CHRISTIE*. Her Wisconsin credits also include multiple productions with Forward Theater Company, Renaissance Theaterworks, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, First Stage, Third Avenue PlayWorks, In Tandem Theatre, Children's Theater of Madison, American Players Theatre, Milwaukee Rep and Door Shakespeare. Regionally, her favorite credits include years in the Twin Cities with The Guthrie, Park Square, Children's Theatre Co., Mixed Blood, Bedlam, People's Center and Minnesota Shakespeare, as well as work with Utah Shakespeare Festival and Riverside Theatre. Elyse is also a member of Forward Theater's Advisory Company. She was a company member at Door Shakespeare for eight seasons and served as director of Camp Will, their summer Shakespeare program. At First Stage, she has worn many hats – both as a longtime faculty member and in administrative roles – for more than 15 years. Her teaching and program design have also shaped theater curriculum in schools and youth correctional facilities. At Next Act, Elyse will oversee all educational programming as well as supporting the company's artistic output.



***"Elyse brings a wealth of experience in both educational and professional theatre, and Wyatt will help expand accessibility, strengthen our connection to the community, and support the development of improved safety and emergency procedures. We look forward to the energy, creativity, and expertise Wyatt and Elyse will bring to our organization."***

*-Artistic Director Cody Estle and Managing Director Libby Amato*

## **Wyatt Meyer has joined Next Act and Renaissance Theaterworks** as our new **Patron Services Manager**.

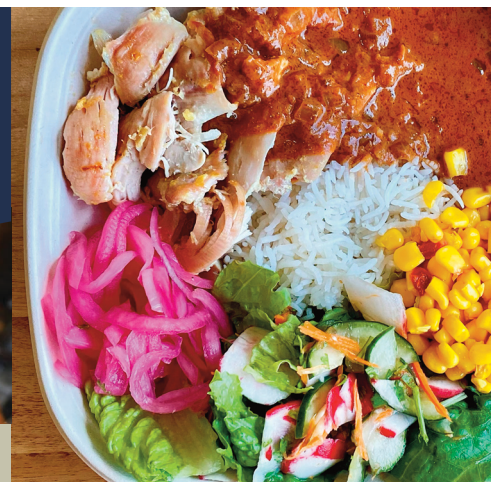
Wyatt is a Minnesota native who relocated to Milwaukee in 2017. Since then, he has become an active part of the local arts community, working as a Production Manager with Bard & Bourbon and The Constructivists. Wyatt also briefly served as the Operations Manager for Present Music, where he applied his expertise in team leadership and operations to enhance performance logistics. In addition to his work in the arts, Wyatt is the Executive Director of the Milwaukee Trans and Queer Depot, an organization dedicated to distributing hormone supplies and providing sober, queer spaces for the community. Wyatt's commitment to fostering inclusive, supportive environments extends to his personal and professional life, where he integrates radical care, systems thinking and direct leadership. He is passionate about creating experiences that are welcoming for all patrons, with a particular focus on accessibility and equity. He will oversee the ticket office and all front of house operations while also spearheading accessibility initiatives for both Next Act Theatre and Renaissance Theaterworks.



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# INSPIRED

## THE ART OF ERICO ORTIZ AND CAROL GLASER

By Jim Toth, Volunteer Art Coordinator

We are a nation of immigrants, and the arts reflect and embrace that reality. Artists are influenced and inspired by the rich multi-cultural tapestry that has evolved into the diverse and inclusive world of American creative expression. Our featured artists, **Erico Ortiz** and **Carol Glaser**, emulate different aspects of this dynamic.

Erico Ortiz, owner and founder of Inspiration Studios in West Allis, came to painting after retiring from a rewarding career as an MPS Spanish teacher and administrator. His expressive works have an open, emotional impact that reflects his Puerto Rican heritage.

Carol Glaser, a mostly self-taught, Milwaukee-based collage artist has found inspiration in the power of African patterns and figures. Her bold and meticulous compositions have a respectful, cross-cultural energy.

As is the case with all art, their colorful, uplifting work is best experienced in person. All are invited and encouraged to take a closer look during the run of **SANCTUARY CITY**.



Sunrise Celebration by Erico Ortiz



Culture by Carol Glaser

### Come See Erico and Carol's Gallery

Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of **SANCTUARY CITY**, September 10 through October 5 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.

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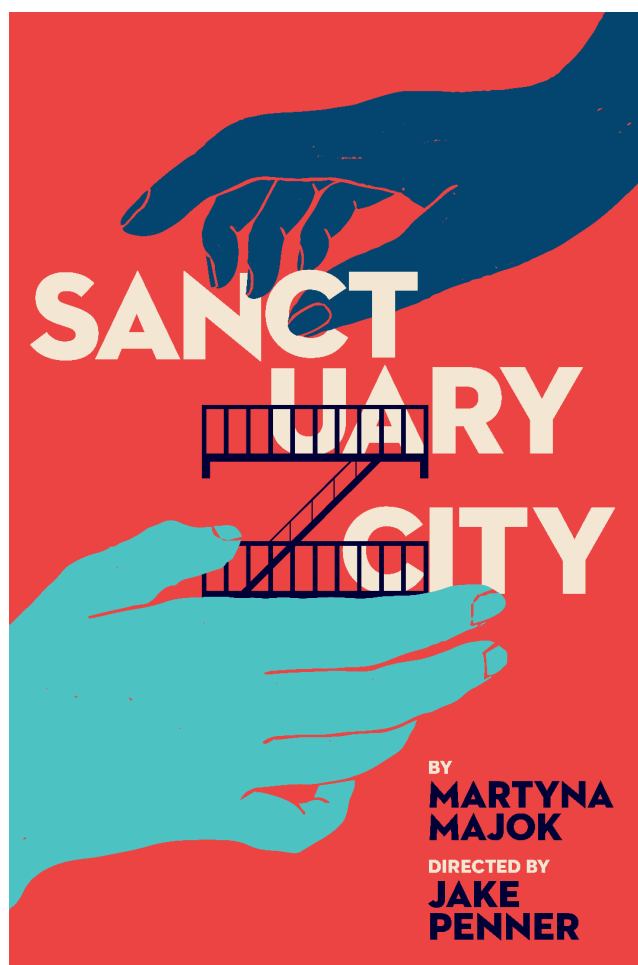


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			SEPT 10 Preview 7:30	11 Preview 7:30	12 Opening 7:30	13 4:00
14 2:00 P/T			17 1:30 7:30	18 7:30 T	19 7:30	20 4:00
21 2:00 P/T			24 1:30	25 7:30 T	26 7:30	27 4:00
28 2:00 P/T	29 PWYC 7:30		1 1:30	2 7:30 T	3 7:30	4 4:00
5 Closing 2:00	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

**Directed by:** Jake Penner

**Featuring:** King Hang, Joe Lino and Ashley Oviedo

**Single tickets on sale at (414) 278-0765 or online at nextact.org**

**SANCTUARY CITY is supported by Producing Sponsor J. Michael Reavis, Associate Sponsor Patty Compton and Co-Sponsors Derin Bjugstad and David Paris, Elizabeth Elving, and Sandy Laedtke**