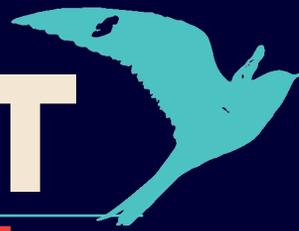


# WHAT'S NEXT



THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 36, ISSUE 3  
FEBRUARY 2026

## COMPASSION IN COMPLICATED PEOPLE ACTOR JACK LANCASTER ON HIS HISTORY WITH *SWING STATE*

By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director and Leslie Lopez, Marketing Intern

In *SWING STATE* by Rebecca Gilman, Jack Lancaster plays Ryan Severson. We are proud to welcome Jack in his Next Act debut, but this is not Jack's first experience with this play! Jack understudied the role of Ryan in both the World Premiere of *SWING STATE* at Goodman Theatre in Chicago and in New York for its Off-Broadway run. We sat down with Jack to talk about his journey with this play and what it means to him.



Jack Lancaster

### How did you first become attached to *SWING STATE* in Chicago?

It's something that's been kind of following me over almost four years. This was my first audition for the Goodman [Theatre], and what jumped out was how much [the role] just sounded like a real person. It didn't feel like I had to try harder than I normally would, even though the material was really dramatic. It just sounds like a person. I taped it when I was in Ireland and found out that I got a callback that would be in person, so I ended up having to fly from Ireland back to Chicago early and went in there with

[director] Bob Falls and [playwright] Rebecca Gilman. And I was offered the understudy, and it just felt like, "yeah, of course ... this is a really great chance to have a relationship with [Goodman] Theatre, and I haven't really worked with other actors in the city yet."

It was a very cool, gratifying experience. I really loved everyone involved. And we got word a few months later that they ended up taking it Off-Broadway, and that they were bringing the original understudies along, which... that never happens, and it was just very amazing. I remember reopening the book again and just being so excited, I was so moved. I think it was the second time around that I really realized how much I loved the play and how lucky it is to be given a script that brings out the best of everyone. You don't have to go over these hurdles of, "how do I make this line make sense or make it sound like a person would speak it?" That work is kind of done for you, and that's, I think, what Rebecca Gilman is really great at. You can see the characters so clearly, and I think everyone can kind of relate in a way, even though they're very flawed characters, Ryan especially. There is a compassion and tenderness to him that I was very drawn to. It's a play that I think even through the past three years, I'm discovering things all the time.

### Having spent so much time with the role already, what does it mean to actually get to do it full out?

Oh, it's amazing. It was always something that I was looking forward to and hoping that I'd really get to tell the story from beginning to end. We did get one understudy run and I just felt amazing, but it still felt like something I had to get out of my system. I've always been a big fan of Rebecca Gilman's from the moment I really took



Jack Lancaster in rehearsal for *SWING STATE*.  
Photo: A.J. Magoon

an interest in theatre. I think that she tells complicated stories, and I think says complicated things with her writing. You can't really decide if the character is good or bad. I think you're always sort of figuring them out.

### What was the experience like preparing to take it Off-Broadway?

There was almost no rehearsal at all. The main cast got there a little bit early to sort of refresh, and it was exactly a year from when we did it. It was October 2022 [in Chicago] and October 2023 [in New York]. It was kind of surprising because the understudies got into New York and sort of went right into runs, rehearsal runs. We didn't really have blocking changes. The set was entirely the same. And the stage was generally [the same], maybe a little bit smaller than in Chicago, which just made it homier. It was just a dream

Continued on page 3

# HARD WORK PAYS OFF

By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

**As soon as** our Next Big Thing Matching Campaign was fully funded [in a mere 14 weeks!], Next Act Theatre began renovating our rehearsal hall. Funds from Val and Gary Zamecnik's \$50,000 donation allowed us to upgrade our lighting grid with new light fixtures, patch and paint the walls, tear up and relay the floor, obtain new chairs and even hang a sign for the newly christened **Val and Gary Zamecnik Studio**.

On Monday, January 12, we invited a group of Next Act patrons, supporters, donors, staff and friends to join us at the ribbon cutting and grand opening of the Studio. "I'm so grateful I met new friends, and our family supported it, and I'm just really grateful ... to have an impact that makes a difference," said Val.

"I've known Val and Gary for many years," said Managing Director Libby Amato. "Their dedication and generosity serve as a testament to their belief in Next Act Theatre. And donations like this are transformative for arts organizations like ours."

Thank you, Val and Gary, for helping us create a space that will breathe new life into our plays and educational programming for years to come!



Photos: A.J. Magoon.

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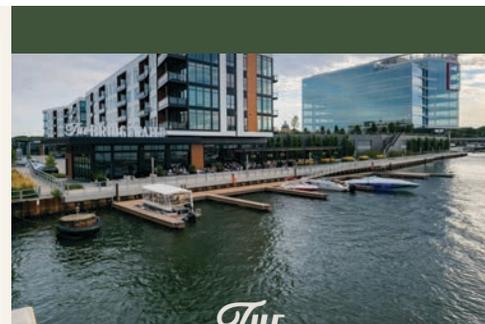
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come true. To be in New York for a job was just something I'd wanted to do for a long time.

### What was your first exposure to Rebecca Gilman?

It was a play that was directed by Robert Falls, so [SWING STATE] was kind of a full circle moment. They did this play that started at The Goodman called LUNA GALE. I saw that kind of around the time I was touring colleges. And it was sort of one of those things, you know, even before I knew what school I wanted to go to, I wanted to be in Chicago because it just seemed like what came out of there was just on another level. And the same goes for that play. It was just like people who are in really, really difficult circumstances, and you cannot dislike them. You just can't. And so she writes compassion in complicated people really well.

### What do you think is the value of doing this play at this particular moment?

It's important to see an area where you're not in a bubble. If you want to be in a bubble, kind of the way to do that is shut yourself out from everyone else and do it by yourself. And [in this play,] you have Republicans and Democrats that are house by house, but they all have each other's house keys, and they all, you know, come over for dinner. And they don't agree with each other, but they are a community. There are lots of people that benefit from us being as divided as we possibly can. At the end of the day, all there is are people. You can choose to really isolate yourself and not be around anyone. I'm not sure that really helps anybody. But that is other people's journey. The most important thing is to have people that you can talk to, and ask for help, and trust that people will be there for you.

### Are there things about this production that excite you most?

I'm very excited about its Wisconsin premiere and doing this in an area where the political divide is quite down the center and doesn't really lean one way or the other, [unlike] a lot of these major metropolitan cities. I'm really looking forward to the variety of responses from this. I hope that some people might even see it as a little controversial. And then some people might just resonate with it all the way



Tami Workentin and Jack Lancaster in rehearsal for SWING STATE.  
Photo: A.J. Magoon

through. But I do think that everyone will be able to see a little bit of themselves in this, no matter your background.

### What do you hope an audience takes away from this play?

When people ask me about it, I'll tell them the name of the play and they ask me if it's political. I think that it is in the sense that very few things are not political. I mean, how far you are from a hospital can be political. All in all, it doesn't really tell you a way to think, but I think that it's something that accelerates empathy.

It can be pretty relevant to people who are quietly struggling, and it's probably important to see people that are like them or like people they know. Whether it be the Driftless Area of Wisconsin or Milwaukee, people that are struggling and some of them who are trying to do it all by themselves and carry that weight alone, versus the people that are desperate to reach out to people but don't really know the way to do that. Whether it makes them feel weak, or they don't want to be a burden on somebody else or know how to trust the people around them. Most people can probably resonate with that, if it's not themselves, someone they know. It really celebrates humanity. It takes an era in political history that was very turbulent, and I think it sort of shuts out a lot of the noise and focuses on these four very regular Americans.

I really hope people make the trip. It encourages people to come together, no matter what side of the political spectrum you're on, and I think that these problems are very human. And I think it shows a lot of people that are ready to give up and are desperate for help and connection and don't really know how to find it. And I hope people really connect with that.

SWING STATE runs February 11 through March 8, 2026 at Next Act Theatre. Get tickets now at [nextact.org](http://nextact.org) or call (414) 278-0765.

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# Next Act Theatre's 2026-2027 Season

Friends,

This year's season features a wonderful mix of new voices, Next Act veterans and theatrical powerhouses. Each of the four plays we have chosen leads with heart while engaging complex issues and thought-provoking themes.

We will kick off our subscription slate with a funny and heartfelt play about two passionate teenagers navigating the trials and tribulations of finding yourself in the world, something audiences of all ages can relate to. We are also thrilled to mount a World Premiere play by Wisconsin playwright Heidi Armbruster that chronicles the rise and fall of the Ringling Brothers. This play with music is, I believe, a can't-miss experience for Milwaukee audiences.

Additionally, I am delighted to revive a Tony Award-nominated contemporary classic that is provocative, hilarious and deeply touching. We will close out the season with a brilliant script by an up-and-coming voice in the American theatre that offers jaw-dropping performances in a play celebrating the fine art of drag.

Together, these four productions create a season that is joyful, daring, entertaining and unmistakably Next Act.

Yours,



Cody Estle  
Artistic Director



## Trayf



By **Lindsay Joelle**  
Directed By  
**Elyse Edelman**

**Wisconsin Premiere!**

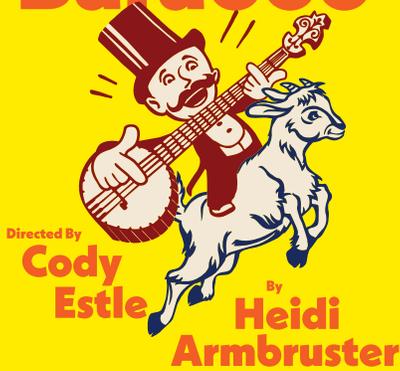
**Trayf**  
By **Lindsay Joelle**  
Directed by **Elyse Edelman**  
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In 1990s New York City, Orthodox Jewish teens and lifelong best friends Zalmy and Shmuel are intent on saving the world from behind the wheel of their "Mitzvah Tank" van. But when a curious outsider deepens Zalmy's interest in the secular world of rock and roll and roller skates, Shmuel will have to do everything in his power to keep his and Zalmy's dreams intact. This road-trip bromance is a funny and heartwarming ode to the turbulence of youth, the universal suspicion that we don't quite fit in and the faith and friends that see us through.

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# The Boys From Baraboo



## The Boys from Baraboo

By Heidi Armbruster  
Directed By Cody Estle

Dec 2 - 20, 2026

Comedy! Songs! Entertainment! Step right up as Heidi Armbruster chronicles the rise and fall of the Ringling Brothers: five boys from Baraboo, Wisconsin. The story of their circus—the greatest show on Earth—is bookended by the brothers’ scrappy beginnings and difficult ends. *THE BOYS FROM BARABOO* tells the uniquely American story of a death-defying entertainment empire: music, storytelling, grit and charm create a tale that’s equal parts vaudeville revue and prestige drama.

Featuring Laura Gordon and Brian Mani

More Casting to be Announced!

*This production is part of World Premiere Wisconsin, a statewide festival celebrating new plays and musicals running throughout 2026. To learn more visit [www.worldpremierewisconsin.com](http://www.worldpremierewisconsin.com).*



## In The Next Room or the vibrator play

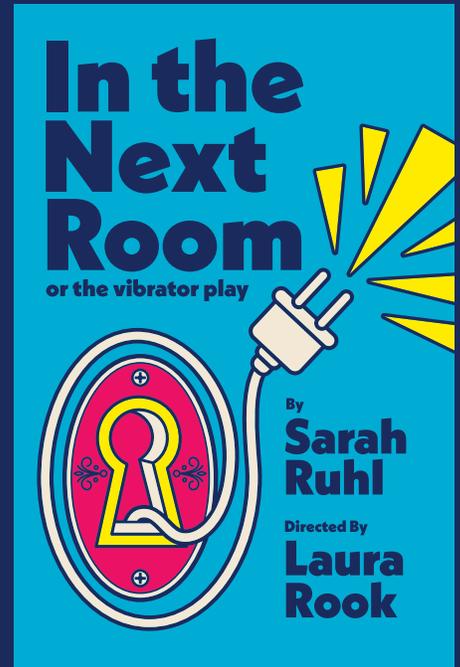
By Sarah Ruhl  
Directed By Laura Rook

Feb 17 - March 7, 2027

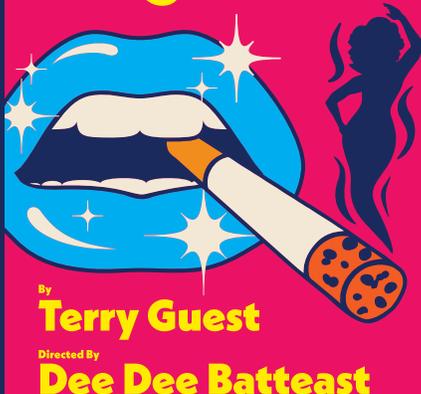
In a seemingly perfect, well-to-do Victorian home, proper gentleman and scientist Dr. Givings has innocently invented an extraordinary new device for treating “hysteria” in women (and occasionally men): the vibrator. Adjacent to the doctor’s laboratory, his young wife tries to tend to their newborn daughter—and wonders what exactly is going on in the next room. From Sarah Ruhl, one of the most influential playwrights of this century, comes a smart, classy and electrifying comedy about longing, intimacy and what it truly means to love someone.

Featuring Elyse Edelman And Dee Dee Batteast

More Casting to be Announced!



## At the Wake of a Dead Drag Queen



## At the Wake of a Dead Drag Queen

By Terry Guest  
Directed By Dee Dee Batteast

April 21 - May 9, 2027

Courtney Berringers would like to welcome you to her wake! But—make no mistake—this ain’t your grandma’s funeral. From African Gods and Goddesses to Judy Garland and Whitney Houston, *AT THE WAKE OF A DEAD DRAG QUEEN* uses legends, icons, camp and drama to tell the story of a pair of drag queens living (and dying) in rural Georgia in 2004. Terry Guest’s whirlwind play explores identity and illness while unapologetically celebrating Black, queer life with all of its sorrows and joys. Come party at the wake—bring your own heels!

Casting to be Announced!

# JOIN OUR INNER CIRCLE

By Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager

**The Producer's Circle** is a dedicated group of Next Act patrons who show their passion for the arts and Milwaukee's vibrant cultural community through their generous donations of \$1,000 or more per year.

Producer's Circle members enjoy a **variety of benefits**, in addition to knowing that they help us to keep our lights on so that we can continue telling the thought-provoking and timely stories that they love.

Some of these benefits include the following:

- Invitations to behind-the-scenes events including first rehearsals for each of our four annual productions
- An exclusive Producer's Circle only-reception and event each year
- A voucher for two free drinks at every Next Act performance, all season long
- Name listed as a Producer's Circle member in playbills and on our website

This season's exclusive Producer's Circle event included a catered reception and conversation with award-winning playwright Lindsay Joelle, director Elyse Edelman and Artistic Director Cody Estle before receiving complimentary, priority seating at the sold-out staged reading of *TRAYF*.



Cody Estle, Lindsay Joelle and Elyse Edelman speak to the Producer's Circle.  
Photo: Tawnie Thompson



Elyse Edelman, Conlan Ledwith, A.J. Magoon, Gabriel Anderle and Lindsay Joelle in a staged reading of *TRAYF*.  
Photo: Caroline Norton

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# HOME GROWN

Shepherdess by Rachel Catlett

## THE ART OF RACHEL CATLETT By Jim Toth, Volunteer Art Coordinator



Rachel Catlett on her farm.

*“My goal is to share a poignant reminder of our connection with the environment through stewardship. The central theme of my painted stories is that there is inherent beauty in our labor; both externally, in how well we steward our surroundings, and internally in how we tend our purpose and well-being. My paintings are about this story. My work is grounded in the shared understanding of agrarianism -that our existence holds purpose- we are created to tend our Eden.”*

Like Peg in *SWING STATE*, our featured artist, Rachel Catlett, has an intimate relationship with her rural environment and the people who inhabit it. Her own words best express this dynamic: “My paintings combine vibrant color, nuanced light, gestural marks, and the depiction of figures at their real and humble work.”

It is always rewarding to find an artist whose work resonates so well with the themes of the play. I am thrilled to showcase Rachel’s art as a vibrant part of the *SWING STATE* experience.

- Jim Toth

Rachel Catlett is an artist and a shepherd, living and working on a small regenerative sheep farm in Sugar Creek, Wisconsin.

With an MFA in printmaking from Colorado State University, she went on to a 30-year career in ornamental horticulture, beginning at the Chicago

Botanic Garden and continuing on as a professional gardener in the Chicagoland and Southern Wisconsin region.

Inspired by a lifelong desire to return to her family’s rural heritage as ranchers, she pursued her interest in regenerative agriculture. She and her husband Ed purchased Brown Dog Farm in 2016, where they raise heritage-breed sheep and goats for wool and meat, and rotationally graze livestock to build soil and sequester carbon.

She has continued her painting practice through multiple careers and shows regionally in the Midwest. She accepts commissions and maintains her studio practice in her farm studio. She enjoys teaching painting and drawing in her rural community, gardening, tending her livestock with the help of her brown dogs, and working with her woodworking husband, restoring their old farmhouse and barns.



Watching Dad Race the Storm by Rachel Catlett



Shepherdess by Rachel Catlett



Cutting Narcissus with Gigi by Rachel Catlett

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**Come See Rachel's Gallery**  
Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of *SWING STATE*, February 11 through March 8 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.

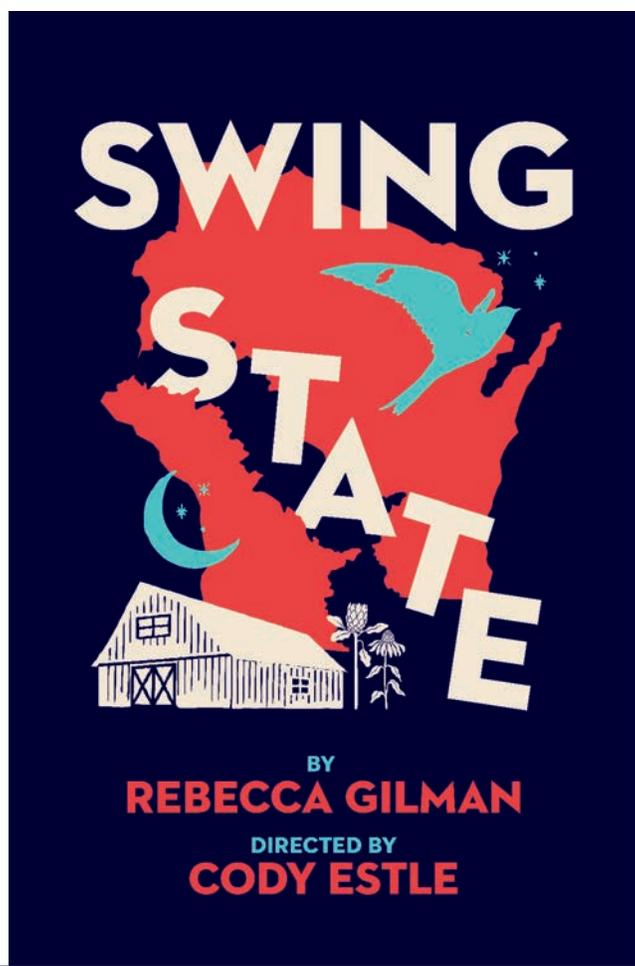


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*"SWING STATE is perhaps the first of the great American post-COVID plays."*  
-Chicago Tribune

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			FEB 11 Preview 7:30	12 Preview 7:30	13 Opening 7:30	14 4:00
15 2:00 P/T			18 1:30 7:30	19 7:30 T	20 7:30	21 4:00
22 2:00 P/T			25 1:30	26 7:30 T	27 7:30	28 4:00
1 2:00 P/T	2 PWYC 7:30		4 1:30	5 7:30 T	6 7:30	7 4:00
8 Closing 2:00	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

**Directed by:** Cody Estle  
**Featuring:** Elyse Edelman, Jack Lancaster, Kelli Strickland and Tami Workentin  
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SWING STATE is supported by Producing Sponsor Donna Martynski, Associate Sponsor Sandra Zingler, and Co-Sponsors Judges John and Jean DiMotto, Pam Frautschi and John McGivern