



# WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 36, ISSUE 4

APRIL 2026

## ART, SACRIFICE AND LEGACY

### SAMANTHA MARTINSON ON DIRECTING A U.S. PREMIERE PLAY



Samantha Martinson.

**Director Samantha Martinson is making her Next Act debut** as the director of *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*. She has taken a long journey to see this play produced on our stage - including a trip to Canada to meet playwright Nick Green and watch a production of the play! We sat down with Samantha to learn more about what drew her to this compelling drama.

#### What brought you to this play?

I directed a staged reading of *CASEY AND DIANA* at American Players Theatre, which is by Nick Green as well. After that reading, I became really intrigued by his writing. I followed him on social media, and then I went and found all the theatres that were producing his work, and I started following them as well. I think that one of the best ways to see what new playwrights are up to is to follow them online.

He had shared a theatre's season

announcement with *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*. And I was like, "what is that play? That sounds really intriguing." I started searching online to see if I could buy it, and I couldn't find it. I had Nick's email from the reading because we were in conversation about *CASEY AND DIANA*, and I sent him a note and I said, "hey, I saw that this is being premiered. I'm really interested, and I can't find it anywhere." And he was like, "actually, it's not published. Here, take a look at it and let me know what you think - I'm not sold on the ending yet."

He sent it over to me; I read it and sent back thoughts, and I was like, "you know, I really think that there's a theatre company that would be really great for this. I think I have the perfect person I would want to have a conversation with to see if this is a play they would want to do - Laura Gordon." I dropped Laura a line and had her read it, and she said, "I really like it," and it went from there.

Then, the second draft came in, and the ending was different. It was really cool to see the conversation and feedback, and how the ending changed.

#### What made you think of Laura for this play?

When you read the play, her voice comes to mind. She is one of the top-tier actors in the area and, I would say, a master of her craft. [She's] someone who can handle the nuance and understands the depth of the character.

One of the things that I've been mulling over with this play is that it's simplistic in its construction, and it's complex in its language. The conceit is a dinner [with] three people. The language and the dialogue around it, and the complexity of conversation that is interwoven, that changes every other sentence, the way they are masterminding this conversation is incredible.

#### Is it reminiscent of Edward Albee's *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?* in that way?

When I was talking about it one time, I referred to it as "*VIRGINIA WOOLF* without the men." \*laughs\*

I do think that, actually, [Margaret's] husband is a really significant part of it, and he's present, but his presence isn't the key feature of this story. I think the relationship is really complex and has a lot of unanswered questions, and what I love is that Nick Green doesn't give you the answers, even in the ending. That's not what is most important; what's most important is the conversation around the decisions that are being made, and what decisions you would make, and what is happening in the moment. It leaves you wondering what happens.

*Continued on page 3*



Crow's Theatre, Toronto. Photo by Samantha Martinson.

*DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS* is supported by Co-Sponsors Margaret Dethloff and Terri Zeh, Mary Jo and Guy McDonald, and Susan and Howard Schoenfeld

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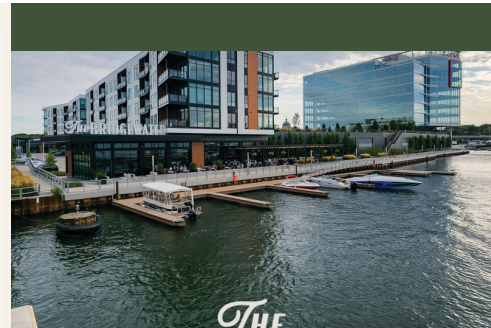
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## What was it like going to Canada to see the play?

I feel really lucky that Next Act was able to offset some of the cost for going to see the play in Toronto. One of the things that was really cool about it is that it hasn't been done anywhere else outside of Canada. The opportunity to see the play and hear it was even more powerful.

You can only gather so much from reading a piece; it's meant to be lived. To see it lived, in action, gives you different insight. I think that's why at the first read[through], you always have this moment where you're like, "whoosh." All of a sudden, there become seven million new layers that you'd never heard before because you hadn't had this team in the room together until now.

[Nick and I] met for dinner before the show. We had a chance to talk about art, we had a chance to talk about casting and about things that he saw in the script that he felt were really significant. We really focused our time on Helen, actually, and understanding her character and the nuance of her. It's a really challenging role for someone in their early career to step into, to be toe-to-toe with such a caliber of talent and skillset that just comes with age. I say that as a younger director, too; things come with age. But something that comes with youth, which you see in Helen, is this elasticity to bend and shape. She's not stuck in one way of viewing the world; she is morphing between these conversations.

## What is your approach to directing?

I think with directing, you're creating space in the room to have conversation: regardless of your experience, your opinions and understanding of your character are validated and explored, and I stay open to the discovery that maybe we are missing something. I try to approach the work by asking: how can I show up and have conversations with Laura, Andrew and Mai, and then take all of those three thoughts, meld them together and extrapolate what's significant?

Honestly, I am constantly learning and being surprised. I never claim to be the expert in the room ever, because I think that can be our greatest downfall. I should know the most at the start, and by the end, I should know the least.

## What is your relationship to Milwaukee?

I didn't grow up as a child [in Milwaukee], but I went to school at Marquette, and I left and lived on the east coast for a minute, and I came back for a gig at First Stage, and then I stuck around. Things just fell into place for me. I have been in the arts world for the past 15 years in Milwaukee, though I've recently relocated to Minneapolis with my partner.

Coming back to Milwaukee in this capacity feels special. It also feels really special to be working with Laura on this project at Next Act. Next Act is a beautiful theatre company that takes risks, but also brings audiences along the journey of feeling safe enough to take on those risks with them. And also making theatre incredibly accessible - you can afford to go and see a production at Next Act no matter where you are [in life].



Mai Abe, Laura Gordon, Andrew May, Laura Kloser and Samantha Martinson in rehearsal for *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*. Photo by A.J. Magoon.

There are some really hard conversations that happen within *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, but they happen so softly that all of a sudden, you didn't realize that's what was happening. Next Act is the perfect incubator for this type of theatre. I feel really grateful that this is the piece that I get to work on for the first time at Next Act.

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

*[Samantha shared part of the email she wrote to Nick Green after first reading the script:]*

"It's taken me a minute to get back to you about *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, mostly because it landed so deeply with me. I've been sitting with the idea of legacy and how it gets created, but even more, I've been thinking about, as a woman, how we reconcile the need to create art with the sacrifices required of us to do so. I'm really interested in the two women: Helen, being on the precipice of stepping into the industry, all to be pushed to the question, "is the truth worth exploiting? What truth do you have the power to shape, and what is our responsibility as women to one another?" This all pulls me back to the question about being compelled to create and our deep connection to passion and identity."

Those things have never left me. What I would love for the audience to walk away with or to think about: again, this play gives us more questions than answers. I hope they can engage in a conversation about truth and power and responsibility; the way that women show up in the arts industry and what obligations we feel are required of us. I think all of those things are circling around the idea of legacy and how we leave the world. What is our responsibility to other humans? Those questions can't be answered in 90 minutes, so I hope that people can continue that conversation.

I think a good piece of theatre comes back to you months later. I hope that audiences don't have the answers when they walk away, but they continue to explore and understand, and think about the world a little differently.

*DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS* runs April 22 through May 17, 2026 at Next Act Theatre. Get tickets now at [nextact.org](http://nextact.org) or call (414) 278-0765.

# REUNITED



Laura Gordon and Andrew May in *FORCE OF NATURE*.  
Photo by Tom Fritz.

## There's a reunion happening during **DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS!**

Actors Laura Gordon and Andrew May are appearing together as Margaret and David, a married couple, in the U.S. Premiere of Nick Green's play. This isn't their first time together on stage, though! Laura and Andrew previously appeared together in several shows at the Milwaukee Rep, including Laura's first-ever show at the Rep (1993'S *DANCING AT LUGHNASA*) and the 1999 World Premiere of *FORCE OF NATURE*. They haven't appeared together on stage since that latter production - until now! Coincidentally, they also played a married couple in *FORCE OF NATURE*. When two actors of this caliber reunite, the result is sure to be spectacular! Make sure you don't miss *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, with its cast 27 years in the making!



Andrew May and Laura Gordon in *DANCING AT LUGHNASA*.  
Photo by Mark Avery

# ARTISTIC LEGACY



Ilana Setapen, Laura Gordon, Heather Keszler and Cody Estle.  
Photo by Khalid Rodgers.

On Tuesday, April 7, Next Act Theatre had the pleasure of hosting **Artistic Legacy: An Evening of Classical Music and Conversation** at our theatre. This event, presented in partnership with the **Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra** and the **Racine Symphony Orchestra**, brought several artists at the top of their fields together for a compelling night of music and dialogue.

The evening began with a performance from Racine Symphony Orchestra Principal Second Violin **Nancy Maio**, who wowed attendees with a remarkable selection of classical music. Following this, we had a panel discussion with *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS* actor (and Milwaukee theatre icon) **Laura Gordon**, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra First Associate Concertmaster and First Violin **Ilana Setapen** and Racine Symphony Orchestra Managing Director **Heather Keszler**, moderated by Next Act Artistic Director **Cody Estle**. Our panelists discussed their journeys in the arts, the importance of mentorship and more.

We were even treated to an impromptu sneak-peek of Ilana Setapen's late-April concert with the MSO, performing *Fandango* by Arturo Márquez. Thank you to everyone who joined us for this engaging event! We had a great time diving deeper into the conversation on artistry and legacy explored in our upcoming production of *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*.



Nancy Maio  
Photo by Khalid Rodgers.



Ilana Setapen  
Photo by Khalid Rodgers.

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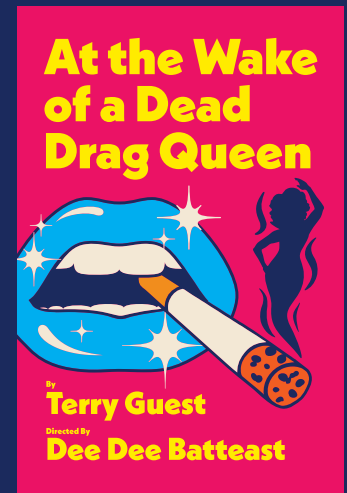
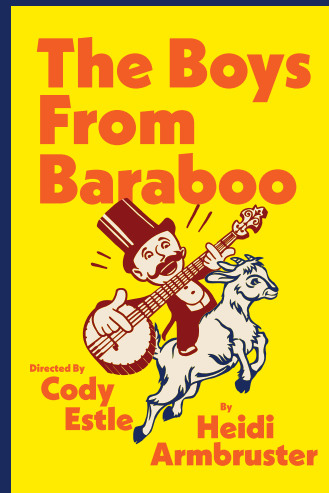
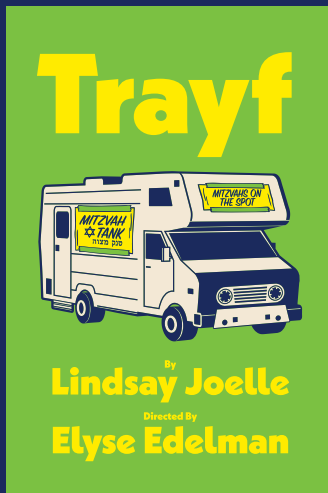
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# Something for Everyone

by A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director



Next Act Theatre's 2026-27 season has something in it you're sure to love. The upcoming season is entertaining, surprising, heartfelt, provocative and compelling - no matter what you like to see when you go to the theatre, there's sure to be something for you. What catches your eye?

## Music Fans Rejoice

Our upcoming season is chock-full of music. In *TRAYF* by Lindsay Joelle, the conflict between Zalmy's Orthodox Jewish lifestyle and his fascination with secular culture plays out, in part, in mix tapes, bootlegs and the music of 1990s New York City. Expect Mordechai Ben David and the Miami Boys Choir sharing space with Elton John, R.E.M. and Nirvana. Heidi Armbruster's *THE BOYS FROM BARABOO* is a play with music: armed with accordions, banjos, guitars and more, six talented actor-musicians bring the story of the rise and fall of the Ringling Brothers to life. Classic American folk tunes like "Oh My Darling Clementine" and "Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay" underscore the scrappy, local beginnings of a circus empire. Meanwhile, *AT THE WAKE OF A DEAD DRAG QUEEN* by Terry Guest promises a larger-than-life experience, including the music of some of history's fiercest divas. Whether you're looking for Whitney Houston, Judy Garland, Diana Ross or Janet Jackson, this pitch-perfect ode to Black queer joy has something for you.

## What's New?

A fan of new stories? You'll love this season at Next Act Theatre! *TRAYF* and *AT THE WAKE OF A DEAD DRAG QUEEN* are both Wisconsin Premiere plays, while *THE BOYS FROM BARABOO* is a World Premiere - the first play Next Act has ever commissioned!

If you like a little bit of everything, you're in luck! Season subscriptions and Flex Passes are now on sale at [414] 278-0765 or [nextact.org](http://nextact.org). Don't miss a second of the upcoming season, and enjoy discounted prices, scheduling flexibility and more. Single tickets go on sale July 13, 2026. Whatever interests you, make sure you don't miss out on Next Act's thrilling 2026-27 season!

## Love Is All You Need

Next Act's 2026-27 is packed full of love - of all different kinds! *TRAYF*'s Zalmy and Shmuel are the definition of a bromance, and their coming of age together reveals the way our friends' love sees us through even the hardest times. In *THE BOYS FROM BARABOO*, love - both family and romantic - is found and lost over decades. *IN THE NEXT ROOM or the vibrator play* by Sarah Ruhl may sound racy, but at its heart lies a tender story of marriage and how to nurture love. And *AT THE WAKE OF A DEAD DRAG QUEEN* centers a queer love story that shows the power of loving someone else, even if you're not sure you can love yourself.

## Entertainment Galore

The 2026-27 season may be one of Next Act's most exciting and entertaining. Interested in high-energy circus shenanigans? How about clever buddy comedy? Or drag performances with enough glitz and glamour to blow the roof off? Whatever kind of entertainment you're looking for, you're sure to find it in the 2026-27 season.

## Lots to Talk About

If you come to Next Act for impactful theatre that inspires thought and provokes conversation, you're in for another great season. Our plays are entertaining, but also full of thoughtful moments and important conversations. The universal struggle of finding where you belong, the desire to leave a legacy worth remembering, the need for meaningful and intimate connection and the challenges of being authentically, joyfully yourself are all on full display in this quartet of compelling plays.

# WHY IS SHOW SPONSORSHIP SO IMPORTANT?

By Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager



Brian Mani and Josh Krause in *BOSWELL*, 2025.  
Photo by Michael Brosilow.

**Each production at Next Act** is sponsored by amazing members of our community that are passionate about the arts. Ticket revenue alone is not enough to support the work that we do to share ideas and perspectives and to bring these important stories to our stage. The support we receive from our incredible sponsors is the first step toward putting each of our productions onto the stage.

**Sponsorship includes a number of perks, varying at each level. All sponsors receive:**

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- Verbal recognition from the stage before each performance of your chosen play
- An invitation to the First Rehearsal Celebration of their chosen production
- All of the benefits of our Producer’s Circle membership, including a voucher for free beverages at each Next Act performance, behind-the-scenes event invites including the annual Producer’s Circle event, and more!

**Each sponsorship also comes with complimentary tickets:**

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Next Act’s plays wouldn’t be possible without each and every one of the sponsors who take such a deep interest in seeing our work brought to life. If you have an interest in sponsoring one of our 2026-27 productions, please reach out to Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager at [tawnie@nextact.org](mailto:tawnie@nextact.org) or via phone at (414) 278-7780, ext. 7.



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# DISTURBANCES IN THE FIELD

## PHOTOGRAPHY-BASED DIGITAL IMAGES BY SARA RISLEY

By Jim Toth, Volunteer Art Coordinator

**In my mind,** Sara Risley is a duchess in her own right. Her long career as an artist has led her to an unapologetic, abstract expressionistic vision that both challenges and excites. Her photographic creations begin with her own digital photographs which she then lets her quirky vision blend and meld different images into fine artwork. As she explains...

*"I am wildly attracted to that which disturbs the norm. I adore the odd angle, the quirky outlook, the extreme emotion. We have the choice to embrace these disturbances or ignore them. I choose to allow them to inform what I create."*

*My photography-based digital images disturb the notion of what photography is. My images all start in camera. The subjects I choose might be from nature, my own abstract artwork, or anything I might see while walking around this world. Rust on a sidewalk, peeling paint, or reflections in puddles may become the source for one of my pieces. I disturb these mundane images, layering, saturating, manipulating until they become an abstract expression hardly reminiscent of their original source. By digitally disturbing the pixels, I create that which may disturb the viewer for its lack of easy answers.*

*My creative process is playful and energetic. The intense hues and sensual shapes remind the viewer of abstract expressionist paintings and lure them in to the intricacies of my digital "brush marks." I love that my images may challenge the viewer's idea of traditional photography."*

Sara Risley lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and in the depths of winter, wonders why. Born and raised in Elgin, Illinois, she got her BFA in photography and film arts from Southern Methodist University and, after a 27 year career as a portrait photographer making everyone look pretty, she was sick of reality and escaped into abstract art. She paints, collages, and creates photographic art all abstractly. She loves going to the theater, writing, and reading. See more of her work at [salarisley.com](http://salarisley.com) as well as on stage as part of the set for *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS!*

Aurora's Song by Sara Risley

### Come See Sara's Gallery

Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, April 22 through May 17 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances. Reproductions of Sara's art will also be featured on the set during the play.



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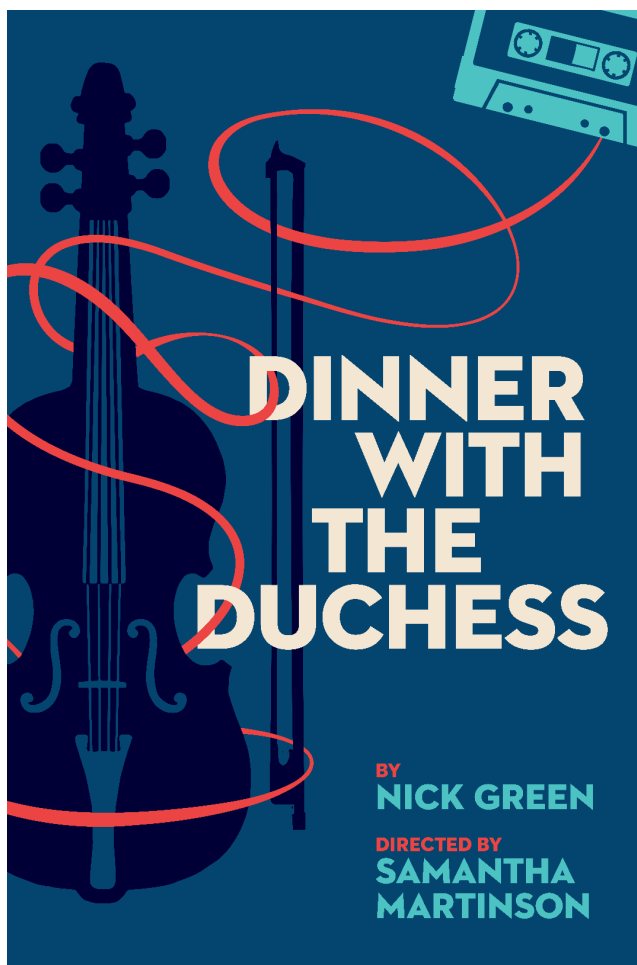


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*"...a powerhouse work about art, music, beauty and the harshness of the truth. It is both eloquent and elegantly written. Terrific."*  
-The Slotkin Letter

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26 2:00 P/T			29 1:30 7:30	30 7:30 T	MAY 1 7:30	2 4:00
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