

AN ACT OF LOVE

LINDSAY JOELLE ON WRITING *TRAYF*



Playwright Lindsay Joelle.
Photo courtesy of Lindsay Joelle.

Lindsay Joelle's play *TRAYF* returns to Next Act Theatre for the second time in less than 12 months: in December 2025, we held a staged reading of the play, which Lindsay joined us for. She spoke with Producer's Circle donors before the reading and read stage directions for us on stage. Now that her 1990's road trip comedy is getting a full staging at Next Act, we sat down with her to catch up and see what she's excited about in a full production.

What was the inspiration for *TRAYF*? How did the play come to be?

When I moved to New York City in 2001, one of the first friends I made was a former [Orthodox Jewish] Chabad-Lubavitcher from Crown Heights who left the community in his 20s to start a new, secular life. He's a wonderful storyteller, and I was always interested in his tales of dipping his toe into the secular world – a covert trip to

Blockbuster as a kid or the thrill of trying on a forbidden pair of blue jeans. It made me see with fresh eyes parts of my own world I took for granted. I'm interested in insular communities; learning about their rituals and routines and bringing those stories to the stage. Zalmi and Shmuel in their Mitzvah Tank are fictional characters, but I knew I wanted to tell a story of friendship – of two friends growing up and apart, and the love between them that proves stronger than ideology.

What research did it take to write this play?

Most of my early research was through my friend's anecdotes, which add up to more than eighteen years of weekend brunches. I also met with rabbis in Crown Heights, talked fedora fashion with a Chasidic milliner, learned proper wrapping technique in a *tefillin* shop, wandered around Judaica bookstores looking for [tapes of Rebbe speeches], sat in the women's balcony at 770 [the main synagogue] and boarded a Mitzvah Tank. Though I made it clear that my motive was to write a play, not to increase my level of observance, it seemed I always had a standing invitation to *shabbos* dinner!

What was easy and what was hard about writing characters whose identities are similar to yours [Jewish], but also different [Chabad]?

When I wrote *TRAYF* for my MFA thesis,

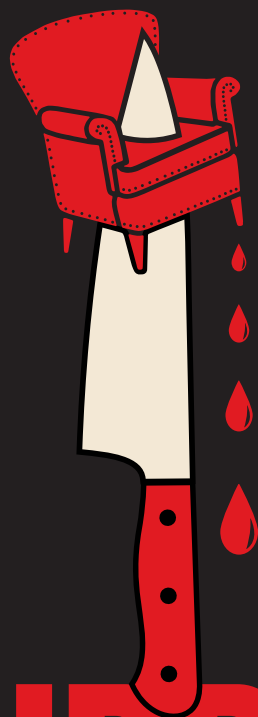
the play culminated in the 1991 Crown Heights Race Riots between the Jewish and Afro-Caribbean communities and the destruction of the Mitzvah Tank. An important realization in the rehearsal process for the World Premiere at TheaterJ was that the play, which at its core is about a friendship, didn't need a riot to feel theatrical. The stakes of growing apart from a childhood friend are vital enough and universal. The moments when Shmuel and Zalmi are goofing off and having fun with each other in the Mitzvah Tank when no one's watching were the best parts to write, and the guys' jokes and banter came the most easily.

Leah and Jonathan were harder. Leah, because she has so much heavy lifting to do in her one short scene, and probably also because her experiences overlap most with my own; Jonathan because he's the character I know least – I wanted to honor his discovery of his Jewish roots and the way that

Continued on page 3

A.J. Magoon and Alex Mitchell in rehearsal for *TRAYF*.
Photo: Caroline Norton





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What's Next is a publication of Next Act Theatre

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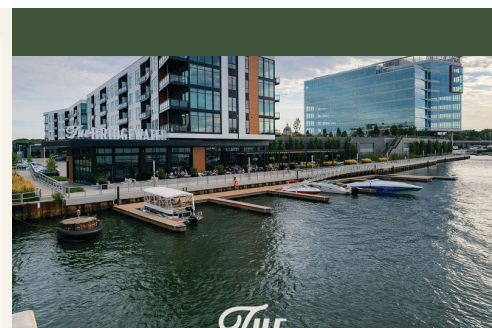
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AN ACT OF LOVE, continued

pulls him toward the community and structure of organized religion, but those aren't motivations I've experienced in my own life.

Did the staged reading of *TRAYF* at Next Act affect your feelings about our fully-staged production?

I think Cody's secret plan for bringing me to Milwaukee for the reading was so that I could mind-meld with Elyse [the director and Associate Artistic Director of Next Act], since I live in Tucson and wouldn't be present for most of the rehearsal process. It was super easy and joyful to work with Elyse. She had an intuitive understanding of the play, and she's such an earnest and generous person herself that I knew she'd be able to hone in on that menschly quality within the play. I also had a lot of fun reading stage directions. I come from an acting background, but I'm not usually asked to take an active part in readings of my plays. I really enjoyed experiencing the momentum and energy of the play from on stage with the cast.

Between *TRAYF* and another of your plays, *THE GARBOLOGISTS*, you have several plays that call for large vehicles on stage. What interests you about putting these vehicles in your plays?

Two things, really: first, I like the fly-on-the-wall quality of listening in on private conversations in intimate spaces. There's something about conversations on the road that can make it easier to get into the good stuff when you're watching the scenery go by or listening to the radio, and in both the plays you mentioned, a truck is the liminal space between the public-facing moments on the job. I'm interested in what people talk about behind the scenes, in the break room, or in transit.

Especially in *THE GARBOLOGISTS*, which follows two sanitation workers from different backgrounds on a garbage route, I was also thinking of the truck as a space of forced proximity, where they are required to interact in a way that they wouldn't do voluntarily in the outside world.

[Editor's note: Next Act Artistic Director Cody Estle directed a production of Lindsay's THE GARBOLOGISTS at Northlight Theatre in 2023!]



Director Elyse Edelman in rehearsal for *TRAYF*.
Photo: Caroline Norton

What do you think *TRAYF* says to an audience right now?

In my research, I was particularly moved by the Chabad belief that love is an action; that the world is imperfect, and it's not by divine intervention, but through dedicated and systematic acts of love toward ourselves and each other that we will repair it. I think that's a message for all of us right now – that we can't afford to be complacent, whether it's the destruction of our shared natural resources or the abuse of the rights and freedoms belonging to those inside and outside our own communities. We activate our love by living our values.

In terms of the way in which writing *TRAYF* was my own act of love, I'd say this: Zalmy and Shmuel are just like any 19-year-old best friends. They drive a cool truck, talk about girls, obsess over music – even though their truck is a Mitzvah Tank, their dates are arranged by a matchmaker, and their music is chanted in Yiddish by a 90-year-old Rebbe. If at first their suits and beards make them appear different and strange, and then in the next 90 minutes we ride with them, experiencing the world as they do, when we leave the theater maybe we're a little changed. A little more primed to focus on what we have in common instead of what divides us. And wouldn't that be a mitzvah?

TRAYF runs September 16 through October 4, 2026 at Next Act Theatre. Get tickets now at nextact.org or call (414) 278-0765.



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MILWAUKEE LOVE

A NEW EDUCATION PROGRAM TAKES SHAPE

By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

A Next Actors student in small, easy.. simple good: The Interview Project.
Photo: Jake Badovski.

This summer, Next Act's education program, Next Actors, got a new look! Recently-promoted Associate Artistic Director Elyse Edelman reworked 28-year-old program, focusing on helping student artists create documentary-style theatre based on interviews with a wide swath of Milwaukeeans. The theme of their program? First Loves MKE.

After four weeks of interviewing, writing, shaping and acting, the students presented *small, easy, simple good: The Interview Project* to a nearly sold-out house at Next Act Theatre. However, that was just the start. Over the course of the next week, the Next Actors toured their original performance piece to eight additional locations across the city, including libraries, retirement homes and even to their peers at First Stage Theater Academy. Many times on tour, Next Actors students would spend time before a performance getting to personally know residents or visitors at the venues where they performed. Overall, nearly 400 people joined us to hear the stories of real Milwaukeeans told by this talented young ensemble.

"I've had the opportunity to build and develop theater education programs throughout my career, including programs at First Stage Theater Academy and Door Shakespeare's Camp Will, as well as foundational curriculum that is still being used at regional theatres and in youth correctional facilities," said Associate Artistic Director Elyse Edelman. "I share that context because in more than 25 years of working professionally in theater, I'm not sure I've ever been part of a project where I could see the impact on individual people's hearts so immediately." Audience members shared praise for the project that included "What a beautiful piece, so well performed! Thanks, Next Actors!" as well as "These young people are so darn good!"

The Next Actors program had an impact not only on patrons who attended a performance, but also on the students involved! "This was such an amazing experience for our daughter," said the parent of a student. "Thanks to everyone involved in making this project a reality. These talented actors have been a true joy to watch!"

Thanks to the hard work, dedication and openness shown by Elyse, our students, co-directors Ken Miller and Jake Penner, interview trainers Elizabeth Elving and Lillie Mobley, our donors and our many interviewees, the first year of our new Next Actors program was a rousing success. We can't wait to see the perspectives, stories and lived experience that future classes bring to the stage in summers to come.



Next Actors meet residents pre-show.
Photo courtesy of Harwood Place.



The 2026 Next Actors.
Photo courtesy of St. Rita's Square.



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IN MEMORY OF JOHN KISHLINE



On Monday, August 24, Next Act Theatre hosted a memorial for prolific Milwaukee artist and frequent Next Act collaborator John Kishline. The event gathered numerous speakers who shared stories of Kish's life and his significant impact on the Milwaukee arts community. It also featured a staged reading of Kish's play *FAUST: AN ENTERTAINMENT* and even a recording of a poem read by Kish, giving him "last word."

John Kishline died Tuesday, June 23, 2026 at age 78 from complications of lung cancer. He appeared nine times on the Next Act stage, each time bringing considerable artistry honed through years of work with Milwaukee's internationally-acclaimed Theatre X. Kish was also a powerful and poignant writer: he lent his playwriting talents to Next Act twice. In addition to his work with Theatre X and Next Act Theatre, he was a frequent collaborator with Theatre Gigante; and he wrote, directed and appeared in numerous productions across not only Milwaukee, but the United States and other countries.

Thanks to everyone who joined us in celebrating this giant of the Milwaukee arts community.

REACHING THE COMMUNITY

By A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director



Jody Hirsh speaks to members of Congregation Shalom.
Photo: Cody Estle.



Elyse Edelman and A.J. Magoon read a scene from *TRAYF*.
Photo: Cody Estle.



Elyse Edelman speaks to the audience about *TRAYF*.
Photo: Cody Estle.

When producing a play like *TRAYF*, Next Act Theatre works hard to include members of relevant communities throughout the entire process. For this play, that means ensuring that the Milwaukee Jewish community has a connection to and a voice in the artistic process.

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On Tuesday, August 18, *TRAYF* director Elyse Edelman, actor A.J. Magoon, Cultural Consultant Jody Hirsh, Artistic Director Cody Estle and Managing Director Libby Amato joined members of Congregation Shalom for a preview of Lindsay Joelle's charming play! Elyse and Jody spoke about the importance of this play at this moment and the efforts to bring this production to our stage in a respectful and authentic way – including many important conversations about accurate costumes, props and music. Elyse and A.J. also read a scene from the play.

Thanks to our lovely hosts from Congregation Shalom! We look forward to seeing you at the play and continuing to invite members of the Milwaukee Jewish community to contribute to the creation of this meaningful production.

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 a long-term investment fund 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 2 free drinks at every Next Act Performance
- 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. A gift could be designated in your will, a Charitable Remainder Trust could be set up, Next Act could be designated as a life insurance beneficiary, or included in other retirement plans. Consider joining the Legacy Society today! For more information, please reach out to Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager at tawnie@nextact.org or via phone at (414) 278-7780, ext. 7.



Charles D. Kakuk.

SPONSORSHIPS ARE STILL AVAILABLE FOR 26-27!

By Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager

Each production at Next Act is sponsored by amazing members of our community that are passionate about the arts. The support we receive from our sponsors is the first step to putting each of our productions onto the stage.

Sponsorships come with a variety of perks including:

- Invites to behind-the-scenes events
- Free tickets to the show you are sponsoring
- Your name listed on the printed materials and signage for your selected show
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If you have an interest in sponsoring one of our 2026-27 productions or you'd like to hear more about sponsorship opportunities, please reach out to Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager at tawnie@nextact.org or via phone at (414) 278-7780, ext. 7.



IN MEMORIAM

TIMES IN NEW YORK

PHOTOGRAPHS OF DOUGLAS KRIMMER (1951 - 2023)

By Jim Toth, Volunteer Art Coordinator

"Fountain of Youth" by Douglas Krimmer.



Douglas Krimmer.

When I learned that TRAYF was going to be our first play of the season, I immediately thought of the NYC photographs taken by my late friend Doug Krimmer. I contacted his widow Mary and was thrilled that she graciously agreed to loan to us large-format prints from the series "Times in New York" that Doug printed before his untimely death in 2023.

Doug was raised in West Allis, WI and after graduation from high school, he started his own construction company, Krimco. He found a second, 25+ year career with the City of Milwaukee as a Commercial Code Enforcement Supervisor. However, his day jobs never defined him more than his passion for photography and the arts in general. Doug's photographic work focused on the streets of New York City where he visited as often as he could starting in the early 90s. As his art practice grew, he became more and more involved in the Milwaukee art scene, including opening Gallery H2O with several partners, where for over 20 years he featured the work of established and up-and-coming artists, including the sculpture of one James Toth. After the gallery ran its course, Doug focused on his photography business, StudioMKE, where he produced high-quality prints for many local artisans.

Doug had an eye for the beauty and dignity in the people and places so often dismissed or ignored. I am honored to share a few of his many, many images as a complement to the world of TRAYF.

Note: All of the photographs on display are one-of-one prints and are for sale for \$200 each. Additional reproductions of this size and quality will not be produced. The photographs are printed on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, an acid-and-lignin-free, museum-quality paper, widely considered a gold standard for archival photography and art reproduction.

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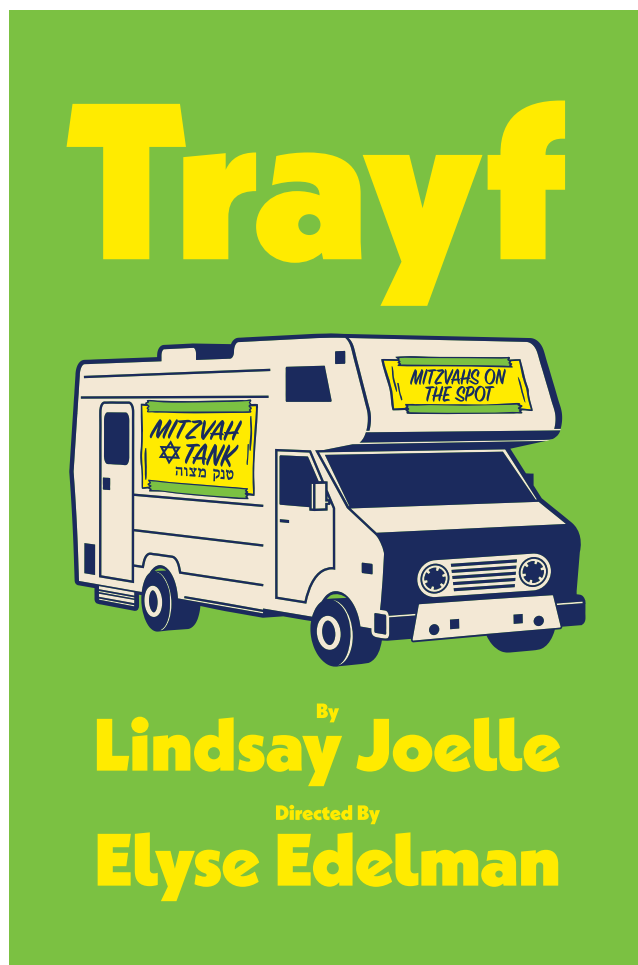


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-The Washington Post

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27 2:00 P/T	28 PWYC 7:30		30 1:30	OCT 1 7:30 S/T	2 7:30 A&T	3 4:00
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