

ANOTHER ROUND? Or, how'd you guys do this year?

by David Ceccarini

Up until about two months ago, my intrepid mom – who will turn 95 years young in July – worked with a few other church friends at a second-hand store called The Carousel. Nestled in the basement of Southport Congregational Church on Pequot Avenue, in Southport CT, the Carousel has long-benefited from Alice Ceccarini's penchant for order, cleanliness, and a sense of fairness when it came to applying any discretionary discounts at checkout time. True to its name, The Carousel continues to send pre-owned goods around for another turn or two rather than being discarded for scrap. But the little, mighty store must now soldier on without one of its most dedicated and sparkling laborers of love. (Though, when we celebrate Mom's 95th in July, no doubt the whole family will drop in for our annual Connecticut bargain hunt, and Alice Ceccarini will dole out the discounts.)

AROUND NEXT ACT

Lately, it has occurred to me that the work here at Next Act appears something akin to a carousel. No matter at which point of the season one steps on you'll need a running start because it's



Good Shopping Here!

always in motion. A play is either in rehearsal or it is opening; or closing. Production plans for the next show are in the making. Deadlines come and go for publications, grants and follow-up reports. Meetings for next year's fundraiser are already scheduled. Even though half a season of plays is still to come, it's time to finalize programming for the next.

Amid this perpetual and overlapping motion, it's difficult to step to the side, get some firm footing and take stock of where we are, or have been, or where we may be headed. But at the risk of being knocked in the shin by a

bounding, wooden horse, I'll jump off the disc for a few seconds to gain some perspective.

THE STATS

This past season, Next Act's 29th, brought success on many fronts. It was our 8th season completed in the new theatre facility, which continues to please patrons, artists and visitors. Subscriptions held more than steady, despite natural attrition and turnover. We saw a welcome 20% boost in single ticket sales and a nearly 12% increase in groups: all good news. Donors were also generous to Next Act this year, from UPAF to the city of Milwaukee, loyal foundations including Herzfeld and Bader Philanthropies, and the many, many individuals who make up our largest funding group: sponsorships, education support and individual gifts. Our heartfelt thanks goes out to all of you, many times over.

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Casey Hoekstra and Chantae Miller in BLOOD AT THE ROOT

THE PLAYS

On a personal note, one major highlight for me was working closely with the incomparable Deborah Staples [Cecsarini], along with dear friends and talented colleagues – Edward Morgan, Carrie Hitchcock and James Pickering – in John Patrick Shanley’s wry, romantic tale of middle-aged redemption, *OUTSIDE MULLINGAR*. We had chased after that play for four years, and, judging by audience reaction and our experience, the pursuit was well worth it.



David Cecsarini & Deborah Staples in *OUTSIDE MULLINGAR*

Moving on to *THE 12 DATES OF CHRISTMAS*, I realize this was not the hard-hitting, thought-driven material which inspires our core Next Act audience. But shows during November and December must compete within a lighter, brighter marketplace of theatrical theme. Susie Duecker’s delightful performance backed by the DooWop Ladies [Kelly Doherty and Marce Doherty-Elst] and Jack Forbes Wilson offered a fun, frothy confection which opened Next Act’s door to many new attendees. And pulling back the play’s warm, fuzzy covering, we got a glimpse at the real world challenges faced by a young woman looking for trustworthy love.

Dominique Morisseau’s *BLOOD AT THE ROOT* brought director Marti Gobel into Next Act’s house, featuring her sit-up-and-take-notice blend of rhythmic, musical and choreographic storytelling. Ms. Gobel piloted her wonderfully-talented cast around the environs of a massive, rope-bound tree, the dominant, haunting symbol of the challenges faced by the teens in Jena, Louisiana, or most anywhere in America. Playing to a rapt audience at home, the cast was further challenged as they took their show out to the very teens they represented onstage, at five Milwaukee high schools. A final, public performance was well-attended by a highly-diverse crowd at the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center.



Norman Moses & Carrie Hitchcock in *HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE*

HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE may have sported a cryptic title, but there was no doubt about the thoughts explored and hearts moved. With great kudos to a wonderful cast and author Bill Cain, we went on a journey of family discovery, the mysteries of aging and the transcendence of the human spirit. As we often heard in the lobby, plays which hit “close-to-home” can leave the deepest impressions, which in turn can offer comfort in knowing that others have walked the paths we find ourselves on today.

THE CHALLENGE

From my briefly-paused perspective, I have one quibble with our carousel ride: throughout the many years of terrific work by Next Act artists in a broadly diverse selection of Milwaukee premieres, and extremely positive reactions from patrons, we continue to have substantial capacity to welcome more people into our seats. One can hear that oft-repeated phrase “the best kept secret in Milwaukee” just so many times before you begin to wonder will the word ever get out? There are thousands of habitual theatre goers in Milwaukee, and I am grateful for those who come to Next Act. But, we have room for many more of those thousands to experience the handmade, one-of-a-kind stories which spring to life so powerfully in our intimate home.

As I prepare to step back up on the merry-go-round for another terrific season, I invite you all to come along with us to pursue the ambitious mission of filling our seats with more theatre lovers like yourselves. We work hard at spreading the word, but your words carry the most persuasive message. We can support your efforts with more brochures, discounts on tickets, mailings to your lists; together, we will make sure that many more theatre fans will finally learn about Milwaukee’s most closely-guarded secret.

See you at the theatre!

WILL RIDE FOR FRANKFURTERS

by David Cecsarini

Sunday, June 2nd, brought a cool but mostly bright day with a moderate breeze.

It was a perfect day for many things: gardening, fishing, a country drive, a horseback ride.

But, starting at 7:15am that recent Sunday, the first of 145 UPAF Ride for the Arts miles was pedaled by yours truly on his 1980s classic Raleigh 10-speed. It’s a smooth ride, my Raleigh; today’s bikers frown at the weight, but I’m still heavier than the wheeled contraption, so I can’t tell much difference.

The first part of the 45-miler goes up and over the Hoan Bridge, which majestically frames Milwaukee’s harbor entrance. And of course, it’s better to ride over it twice to get the full effect, not to mention you end up heading north to continue the route to Concordia University, in Mequon, about 23 miles away. A new wrinkle this year was allowing riders to stop near the top of the arch for photo ops, but since I’m not much for selfies, I opted to roll straight through.



Four years riding: Jay, Amalia, Tessa & Deborah

By the time I was halfway up Lake Drive pedaling through Shorewood [beautiful new asphalt stretch, Go Shorewood!], the 7:45am group started their ascent over that same bridge. But having the sense to continue southward, they went one-and-done



Tessa & Amalia at the top.

on the big span. Here were the rest of the Cecsarini team; my lovely Deborah, daughters Miranda and Amalia, and new this year, young Abraham LeMaitre, Miranda’s “just-a-friend” – we think more – kind of sophomore young fella. Well, to his credit, he rode the 25 miles as an adopted Cezzy family member, even dealing with a leaky tire. Thank goodness for the Wheel & Sprocket technicians wielding air pumps at the oasis stops.

Along with the Cecsarinis rode the Family Raymond: Cara, Jay, Tessa, Corinne and Miles, solidifying tradition, now 4 years strong. We wrapped up at the Summerfest grounds as per usual, though this year, soccer games and other plans kept our rest on the shorter side. We timed our exit well, however, judging by the length of the Usinger’s hot dog line as we said farewell.

All told, we completed our 145 mile goal to which you, our cheerleaders, donors, and friends, have committed your support of over \$4,700! Plus, a new bike from Wheel & Sprocket will be donated to a local youth organization. Thank you for your belief in our family tradition again this year, for your belief in the value of the arts, and for your support of the UPAF campaign.





“What does ‘status’ mean?” I asked the classroom of high school freshmen. The first answers were about Facebook status, the stats you accrue in a video game, and “relationship status.” I dug deeper. “If a character in a play has high status, what does that mean?” Ideas flowed. Perhaps they’re the main character, perhaps they have money, power, popularity. AirPods were mentioned [and then explained to me]. A young woman brought up the fact that she finds it particularly interesting her peers have been referring to this high-status character as “he” while we discuss.

I then asked the class to tell stories about status through frozen pictures. The instructions were to freeze as if you were in the middle of a scene, and let the audience guess what was happening. The discussion turned to artistic intent vs. audience interpretation, and how we can use spatial relationships to tell clearer stories. The students brought up tough topics and handled them with respect, and invented hilarious scenarios involving meme culture. “See? You know all of this already,” I reminded students. “You just don’t know you know it yet.”

IMAGINE

This is one example of a Next Actors recruitment workshop. Teachers within and without MPS let me and other instructors lead 25 different classes this year – Theater classes, English classes, World History classes, and after-school forensics meetings were all included. We met no less than 443 high school students, each with a creative idea, an

opinion, a voice of their own. We led them through silly ice-breaking warmup games, challenged their ideas about story, and then let them invent and play without smothering them with too much instruction. “This is a crash course in what we would do over the summer,” I reminded them at the end of our workshop. “Imagine if, instead of just one class period, you had five weeks to take these ideas and craft them into a larger picture.”

I am currently in the liminal space between sending out acceptance letters to this year’s Next Actors and beginning the program. It is almost impossible to plan how the summer is going to go when you do not have a finished script until maybe the third week. But I do have ideas about which games and exercises are best to accomplish the basic formula of A) get to know each other, B) figure out what you’re passionate about together, and C) tell that story on a tour of audiences throughout the Milwaukee area – Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, CLCs, local senior centers.

LOTS OF NEW

But these students have so far never met each other, perhaps never had the opportunity to write their own story for an audience, and some of them have never even been on stage before. I have to teach them to be comfortable in their bodies, to use space to tell their story, to be loud enough [which is almost always “be confident enough”], and work together with respect and support.

The students are from widely varying life experiences, family and school structures, and cultural backgrounds. And somehow, by the end of the summer, I and the other instructors take our hands off of the handlebars and magic happens. It’s a bit like getting a group of teenagers to build the plane as they fly it, and then jump out with a parachute once the thing is built. It is exhilarating and rewarding, and even though it hasn’t started yet, I know it will be over too soon.

Benefit Performance
 Saturday, July 27, 2019 | 4:30 PM
 \$6 in advance | \$8 at the door
 414-278-0765 | www.nextact.org

2019 Next Actors is made possible by
 Werner & Susan Krause • Milan Racic in Memory of Gordana Miles & Barbara Capron • The Gardner Foundation
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A Legacy Continues

When you’re asking a group of people, most of whom are new to theatre, to create an original work, it’s easy to forget that the program itself isn’t new. Next Actors started before I could have been enrolled in it myself. I am taking the helm from a highly experienced theatre teacher (and also one of my favorite actors in Milwaukee) who led the Next Actors for 8 years. I have had the honor of working with Karen Estrada in the classroom and the rehearsal room, and I can only hope I will fill her shoes with the love, honesty, discipline, and abundance of joy she brings to the students. Karen is a busy artist, and while she may return to Next Act as a guest teacher or actor, she has graciously passed me the baton. Here are some questions I asked Karen during the handoff.

Q: What was your first year like?

A: My first year with Next Actors was crazy and delightful. Both Doug Jarecki and I had very little idea what we were doing but that is nothing new and we figured we had each other to lean on so it would all work out. Plus, Dani Kuepper and Jason Powell so...

It was so slapdash and unfocused, curriculum-wise. Too much improv, not enough writing. We didn’t know how long it would take to create usable work. I think what we ended up performing was put together in the last three days before tour.

Q: What kept you with the program for all these years?

A: Next Actors was always interesting and challenging. I loved that we never knew what would happen and that by creating a trust-filled work space the kids felt free to try more than I imagined they could or would. I was always so proud of them and proud of their work and glad to have helped them. I think



Karen Estrada at her final benefit performance in 2015

teenagers are un-cynical about themselves and the future of humanity as a whole in a way that made compelling and thoughtful work. It was easy coming back year after year.

Q: What does Next Actors do for Milwaukee that no other program does?

A: Next Actors has a social justice bent and a community building aspect that is unlike anything else in town. We make better citizens through art.

Q: What upcoming projects are you really passionate about?

A: I am so excited to be directing Alvaro Saar Rios’ world premiere play *ON THE WINGS OF A MARIPOSA* at First Stage Milwaukee next season. It is a glorious story about the Day of the Dead and the Monarch butterfly migration.



2019 Next Actors

Carl [C] Dotson - Bradley Tech High School
 Mika Liss - Waukesha South High School
 Courtnie Thomas - Bradley Tech High School
 Allahna Simon - Milwaukee High School of the Arts
 Ryleigh Carroll - Ronald Reagan IB High School
 Leyla Sutton - Veritas High School
 Olivia Gannaway - Greendale High School
 Thomas Rose - Marquette University High School
 Asia Steele - Waukesha South High School
 Gabriela Bastardo - Golda Meir School
 Roman Dentice-Cagle - Whitnall High School
 Tomisha Jackson - Milwaukee High School of the Arts

As part of our community mission, Next Act offers the theatre space for rent. Each producer is solely responsible for the content and quality of their performances. Here's what they have to say about their upcoming productions.

Tamarind Tribal Belly Dance presents
TRIBAL UNION 2019

Tamarind Tribal Belly Dance returns for the third year in a row for their annual celebration, Tribal Union. Along with numerous workshops over the weekend, they will host two different public performances. Information is below.

OPEN DRUM CIRCLE/DANCE PARTY

The Friday night dance party is an opportunity to stop out and dance with some of our favorite local musicians (Nazario and Kirk), shop, drink, and be entertained. With nearly three hours of fun and entertainment, this is your chance to meet new people, strut your stuff in an open dance forum, and also catch some of the best and brightest talent in the community with sporadic performances throughout the night.

Friday, August 16 • 7 PM. Tickets \$10

FAIRY TALE FOREST

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...

Twelve forest faes lived happily in the trees, playing pranks and dancing with flowers in their hair and little bells on their hands for all of their animal friends.

But one day, a darkness fell across the land and dancing was forbidden by an evil queen. The forest was filled with sadness, because the faes grew bored and were



filled with despair. The faes, ever mischievous, violated the new law and began to dance and dance and dance until the sun rose, much to the delight of all of the forest's creatures. They had nearly gotten away with it, but one of the queen's spies heard the music and laughing and the bells.

The twelve faes were divided, separated, and banished from the kingdom, condemned to spend the remainder of their lives searching for one another and returning home.

Will peace be restored? Will we all live happily ever after? Get your tickets and find out!

Saturday, August 17 • 7:30 pm. Tickets \$20

Purchase tickets at nextact.org.



Next Act and I go back to 2015. That means I'm about to enter my fourth season as a patron and third season as the youngest board member at this small-but-mighty company on the cusp of its 30th birthday. The longest subscribers have been devotees for 28 years. I've got a long way to go, but I'm no less devoted.

Thanks to my parents' impeccable taste in Original Cast Recordings, I cut my theatrical teeth on *LES MIS*, memorizing every last word to "Lovely Ladies" by the time I was four. How age appropriate! Now a copywriter by day, I've been blogging about Milwaukee theater by night for a handful of years to keep my theater love light burning and, hopefully, inspire that love in others.

To be honest, Next Act was the first company that challenged me to get a little uncomfortable, sit with some uneasy topics, and redefine for myself what makes a worthwhile evening of theater. Done right, an intimate black-box performance often exceeds the allure of big ol' Broadway, and Next Act does it right. Each season promises a spectrum of human experience and feeling, always with connection at its core: connection to new ideas, viewpoints, and untold histories – even herstories.

There are stories like 2018's *I AND YOU*, soul-stirring and surprising. 2016's *TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES*,

1992, broadening one's worldview. 2017's *BLOOMS-DAY* – intimate, poetic, and sweet as can be. 2019's *HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE*, heartfelt and laugh-out-loud funny. 2017's *SILENT SKY*, uncovering a little-known legacy. 2019's *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*, exhilarating in its staging, powerful in its message. 2015's *BACK OF THE THROAT* – the play that first made me squirm for all the questions and conversations it prompted about prejudice, paranoia, and perceptions of race and religion.

This is a company that believes its patrons are up for a challenge. It's right there in the Next Act mission statement: "to engage the hearts and minds of audiences with intimate, compelling productions intended to stimulate thought, foster the exchange of ideas, and promote the development of new perspectives and understanding." Challenge accepted. Mission accomplished.



For more information on these events and other upcoming rentals, visit www.nextact.org. Purchase tickets online at www.nextact.org, by phone at 414-278-0765 or in person at 255 S. Water Street.

Need a space for your business meeting, retreat, or seminar? Rent Next Act: 414-278-7780

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WHAT'S NEXT

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Goodbye to Our Fan and Friend

At the age of 88, the curtain closed on the final act of longtime Next Act fan and patron, Ken Lukow, who died May 16. Ken and family frequently made the trip from Racine to Milwaukee, specifically to enjoy performances at Next Act. Ken and his late wife Peg loved theatre and according to son Mark, who often attended with his father, Next Act was their favorite.



Born in Chicago, Ken worked for SC Johnson & Son for nearly 40 years, winning awards for his technical prowess. Outside of work, Ken was an avid photographer, Ansel Adams enthusiast, lover of

music and theater, Boy Scout leader, and member of Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church for 50-plus years. He was devoted to nature and loved canoeing, camping, sailing and fishing. He and Peg were passionate Frank Lloyd Wright fans and loved their 1967 La Verne Lantz home. Ken spent decades cultivating its native landscape and enjoyed sharing plants and advice to help others with their own native gardens.

Ken will be deeply missed by his children, grandchildren, other relatives and dear friends, including all of us at Next Act; we looked forward to his ever-ready smile and engaging conversations when he visited. **We are especially grateful to his surviving family who suggested that donations in Ken's memory be made to Riverbend Nature Center (riverbendracine.org/about/donate) and Next Act Theatre.**



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Next Actors Benefit Performance • Saturday, July 27, 2019 | 4:30 PM



Photo: Timothy Mader

Theatre by and about teenagers

Join us for the debut of an entirely new play, directly from the hearts and minds of the Next Actors. Over the course of six weeks the Next Actors will meet new friends, exchange lots of ideas, hone their storytelling skills, create an original theater piece, and then tour their show to local Milwaukee communities for an entire week. This one-time benefit performance is their big finish on Next Act's professional stage.

"I learned a bunch of theatre skills, such as projection and improvisation. I also learned about pushing boundaries..."

"I learned the ability to behave in a manner in which the goals of my community can be easily reached."

"[Next Actors] changed my life and gave me a role in my community."

"It is a completely unique experience. It taught me a lot about myself and others. I think it is important for teenagers to have an outlet like this to express their opinions in an artistic way."

**Tickets: \$6 in advance | \$8 at the door
414-278-0765 | www.nextact.org**