

# what'snext

the newsletter of Next Act Theatre

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## Why A SMALL FIRE?

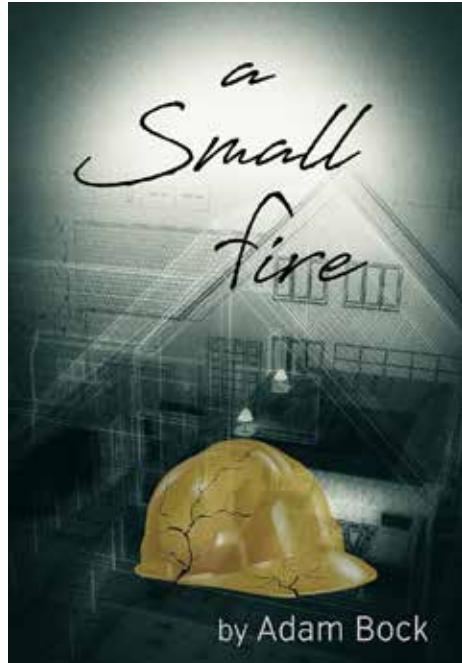
**I'll admit,** this play is tricky to write about. Adam Bock's *A SMALL FIRE* is a gentle, quiet and, ultimately, deeply moving expression of what it means to be alive.

Exactly; a simple story about ... everything.

Bock brings us the character of Emily Bridges, a tough, self-made construction company CEO, who suffers no fools or nonsense, either professionally or personally. She depends heavily on her construction manager Billy Fontaine, who sometimes plays the additional role of family friend. Emily's husband John clearly hovers in the background of their relationship, and their adult daughter, Jenny - not particularly close to Mom - is poised to embrace a fresh start with her impending marriage.

### CHANGES

Into this uneasy status quo comes an unidentified phenomenon? syndrome? disease? which gradually brings profound and, seemingly, irrevocable change to the Bridges' household. How this mysterious intrusion alters the lives of the family becomes the journey of discovery that



playwright Bock has prepared for his audience. It is a journey which is much better experienced than described, and so, with no spoiler alerts necessary, I leave it to the play to explain further.

The play does, however, generate rather provocative questions for which I have no good answers, only more questions.

The play challenges me by asking, "Who am I? What is my personal identity? What makes me, Me? And how would I manage if that identity, that self-image, the "story of Me" were suddenly lost?"

As per usual, I start to look for answers close to home.

### FAMILY STORIES

My dad, Harry A. Cesarini, was a first generation Italian-American who grew up in Cleveland, was educated as an engineer, served

in World War II, and then set out to grab his slice of the American Dream. Along the way, he met and married Alice Hitchcock, and they created a family, with kids Linda, Lois and David.

Family photos show the Cesarini's as 1950s quintessential: split-level house, Chevy in the garage, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Happy Halloween, Merry Christmas with all the trimmings.

Dad was gone a lot. His classic, breadwinner job required many hours and plenty of overseas travel, which he enjoyed. He also identified strongly with his job; it was the yardstick with which to measure his success. As many people do, I think my dad saw his life mainly through the lens of his career. And when that career ended too soon and too quietly, things changed.

At the same time that Mom was establishing herself as a top-notch school principal's assistant, Dad established himself in his chair, homebound. And although he sought out activities and hobbies, he never latched onto a pursuit which would adequately engage his time, talent and attention, and gradually faded into himself. Mom faithfully and lovingly cared for him till the end, in 1996. And yet, throughout his decline, she coaxed from him nearly every bit of himself which remained, though rendered inaccessible to anyone else.

My mom is a phenomenon of devotion and love.

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**Next Act is already** looking forward to our summer education plans! In the hopes of increasing enrollment, we've adjusted programming to accommodate the very busy lives of our students: the Next Actors program will be shortened by a week, and an additional two-week opportunity will be added to the end of the summer in our new Special Skill Development program. I'm excited to tell you all about it!

We've noticed that our teens struggle to commit to six weeks of programming (five weeks of developing a show, and one week of touring that show to local communities) so we have shortened the duration of Next Actors. We will still have a full week of touring to local organizations; we are simply removing the intimidation of a blank page from the writing process and instead letting our students work with a theme. "The enemy of art is the absence of



Why A SMALL FIRE continued

#### OUR PLAY

In *A SMALL FIRE*, Emily Bridges faces increasing challenges to her health, her ability to work and eventually, to her self-identity. She and her family must either meet these challenges together and remain whole, or suffer the consequences of fear, pain and defeat. Adam Bock's heart-rending play offers us an intimate and inspirational look inside this deeply personal struggle of a family in crisis. He shows us there is strength and hope in the phenomenon of love.

Perhaps we know this to be true, but it never hurts to say it again.

See you at the theatre.

A SMALL FIRE by Adam Bock						
JANUARY 30 - FEBRUARY 23, 2020						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
				30 Preview 7:30	31 Opening 7:30	1 4:30 8:00
2 2:00			5 1:30 7:30	6 7:30	7 4:30 8:00	8
9 2:00			12 1:30 7:30	13 7:30	14 4:30 8:00	15
16 2:00	17 7:30		19 7:30	20 7:30	21 4:30 8:00	22
23 2:00			7:30	7:30	7:30	P Pay What You Can
Personal Preview (Begins 30 minutes prior to curtain)						
Talkback						

BRRR . . . AVO! 2020!!

While it may be cold outside, spring really is right around the corner. And that means it's time to raise a glass at Next Act's annual fundraiser as we celebrate the end of our 30th anniversary season.

And are we going to have fun! Join us for: BRAVO, NEXT ACT 2020!

#### Standing By to Lend a Hand

by Christine Yündem, Ticket Office Manager

**It's almost an hour** until performance time and there are already people bustling about in the theatre lobby. They are volunteer ushers, signing in, donning their badges, meeting with the House



Manager, sharing information and prepping programs for the soon-to-arrive audience. Greeting patrons, taking their tickets and locating seats, these friendly folks appreciate theatre-goers and are always ready to provide any extra information or assistance that may be helpful.

Each of our four regular-season productions requires a total of 154 ushers through the run, and independent productions that rent the Next Act Theatre space also benefit by using our reliable, experienced ushers corps.

Next Act truly appreciates its volunteers, not only for the service they provide but for their support of the theatre in the community at large. Some loyal volunteers have been with us for decades while new recruits come on board each season and we thank them all!

If you or a friend are interested in finding out more about volunteering for Next Act, please visit [nextact.org/support-us/get-involved](http://nextact.org/support-us/get-involved) or call the Ticket Office at 414-278-0765.

# 30 Never Looked (or Sounded) So Good

**As we find ourselves** in the midst of our 30th anniversary season and reflecting over the 112 mainstage shows we've produced, we asked you about your relationship with Next Act Theatre. What first brought you here? How long have you been a patron? What keeps you coming back? We've compiled some of your answers below along with production photos. Share your favorite memory with us on Facebook or by emailing info@nextact.org.

From the day we saw Jonathan Smoots in the role of a lonely and isolated fisherman who was in a relationship by mail, while Next Act [then Theatre Tesseract] was still at Lincoln High School for the Arts, we were "hooked." Over the years, we have enjoyed the consistency of David Cesarini's mission of presenting meaningful and thought-provoking shows and look forward with anticipation learning the theme for the next season.

Thank you, Next Act, for providing Milwaukee with Theatre That Matters.

- Norm and Sherry Malmon, season ticket holders

My wife and I were introduced to NAT by a couple of friends that invited us to join them at a performance. *TAKING LEAVE* was one of the first shows and we were captivated by the intimate space and the power of the performance. There have been so many great shows over the years that we keep coming back and bringing friends to share the experience.



- Dave Anderson, Board President and season ticket holder

*LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR*. Well-cast and well-acted.

- Gary Springman, first-year season ticket holder

I appreciate the variety that is offered. I tend to not be drawn to highly advertised, greatly hyped shows or "classics" that are done over & over. I'd rather see something that is fresh to me and that offers some food for thought as well as entertainment, and I find that at Next Act.

- Lynda D., season ticket holder since 2016



Photo: Ross Zentner

We love Next Act! David Cesarini has his finger on the pulse of Milwaukee theatergoers. His up close and personal approach is what keeps us coming back year after year! Superb acting, inventive plays - and not a bad seat in the house.

- Marianne and Shel Lubar, season ticket holders since 1998

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Photo: Ross Zentner

I tend to like dramas better than comedies. My favorite is *THE PAVILION*. I like the ambience of Next Act... *EVERYBODY* is nice. I remember years ago that I just forgot to go to a play, and Charles gave me tickets for a later performance. I was very impressed with his kindness.

- Russell Brooker, season ticket holder



Photo: David Cesarini

I have been a subscriber for more than 15 years. So many shows, so little time. I have enjoyed them all; I have learned something from each and every one. Thank you, Next Act Theatre!!

- Joyce Mielke, Board Secretary and season ticket holder since 2000



Photo: Ross Zentner

My son and myself have been attending plays for over ten years. The reason we love Next Act is because many of its plays touch human life situations and experiences, which make us think, make us laugh and make us cry.

One play that really touched me was *THE OTHER PLACE* because my family suffered with my mother's Alzheimer's. Deborah Staples did a wonderful portrayal of a person losing her memory. I cried throughout this whole production because it brought back so many memories. Thank you for sharing this very painful life experience.

- Rose Oliva, season ticket holder since 2008



Photo: David Cesarini

Karen and I have many fond memories going all the way back to Theatre Tesseract, but a more recent experience really illustrates why we have been such loyal patrons. It was during a performance of *VISITING MR. GREEN* in the new space. We usually like to sit in the first row of the center section, but had to exchange tickets and ended up in the first row of a side section instead. At first I was somewhat distracted by the audience seated directly across from us, but soon found myself so engaged that they just disappeared. That feeling of getting caught up in the characters and the story, that feeling of immersion, is a recurring theme to our Next Act experience. What could be better?

- Jim Toth and Karen Johnson, season ticket holders & Volunteer Art Curator

## PHOTOS

Facing Page [Clockwise from upper left]

*TAKING LEAVE* [2003] Richard Halverson, David Cesarini, Katheryn Phillips

*UN SILENT NIGHT* [2016] Andrew Muwonge, David Cesarini

*LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* [2019] Seth K. Hale, Dylan Bolin, Mohammad N. ElBsat, David Cesarini

This Page [Clockwise from upper left]

*THE PAVILION* [2008] Mark Ulrich, Mary MacDonald Kerr, Angela Iannone

*VISITING MR. GREEN* [2002] Gerard Neugent, Robert Spencer

*THE OTHER PLACE* [2007] Deborah Staples, Cristina Panfilio

## Upcoming Events in Next Act's Performance Space

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.

### DanceCircus presents

#### TURBULENCE PROJECT

The Turbulence Project is a series of moving encounters with random phenomena that reveal, like chaos theory, the infinitely deep interconnectedness of our planet and our capacity to transform. These works by Artistic Director Betty Salamun convey deeply felt environmental concerns in movement, stories and video. Events reflect energy of the Avenues West Neighborhood, the flow of earth and water along Lake Michigan's shoreline, the healing power of grief, and the strength of community. Putting together beauty and wrenching content, this performance work is part lullaby and part chronicling of environmental crimes.

March 19 – 22 • Tickets \$20



### Danceworks presents

#### 101 WAYS TO ENTER & EXIT [STAGE DOOR LEFT]



Our lives are marked by comings and goings. Sometimes a grand and sweeping entrance – sometimes an abrupt and unexpected exit. Long goodbyes, stumbling onto stage unprepared or shot like a cannon into the unknown. We'll explore tales that exude humor, sorrow, joy and compassion crafted by guest author, Jennifer Kohnhorst [The Moth Twin Cities StorySLAM Winner, DPC's Secrets from the Wide Sky].

This theatrical event unfolds with original music by percussionist Andy Miller [UWM Dance Department's Music Director], who provides drum rolls to accompany grand entrances and the steady pulse that vibrates through the exuberance of birth, the endurance of life and the ritual and beauty of death. Choreography by Danceworks' Artistic Director, Dani Kuepper embodies these extreme moments of lived experience through an intergenerational cast that offers a collective wisdom and diverse perspective of beginnings and endings.

May 14 – 17 • Tickets \$14 - \$27

For more information on these events and other upcoming rentals, visit [www.nextact.org](http://www.nextact.org). Purchase tickets online at [www.nextact.org](http://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

### SKYLINE CATERING

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### WHAT'S NEXT is a quarterly publication of Next Act Theatre

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Editors Rebecca Moder & David Cecarini Layout Rose Delaney

## An Inner Fire – the abstract paintings of Virgilyn Driscoll

by Jim Toth

**What would the world become** for you if you lost your sensory connection to its physicality? What sensory memories would dominate your inner world? Phantom smells...sounds...images? What might that inner world look like? This concept of somehow representing thoughts and emotions of a very personal and private nature plays an important role in the abstract expressionistic paintings of Virgilyn [Virgi] Driscoll, our guest artist for A SMALL FIRE.

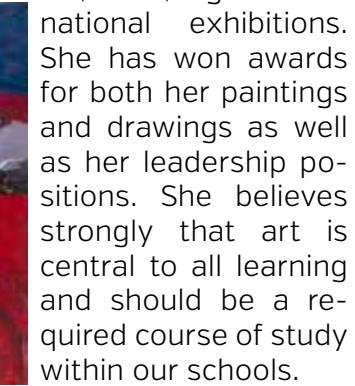
"By painting webs of color, turning a blank canvas into a mystery of inner and outer spaces and shapes, I offer the viewers a journey into their own mind's eye. There is a mystery in abstraction and many meanings can be observed by the person viewing it. The viewer brings his or her own experiences to the painting. That builds a new understanding of the painting. That completes the painting."

In the play, when the character of Emily loses her sensory connections with the physical world, her inner emotional world becomes overloaded and



leads to new challenges for herself and her relationships with others. Virgi's paintings represent a similar dynamic by presenting a visual overload of "colors, shapes, textures, spaces and inner concepts and meanings" which challenge the viewer to interpret; to impose order; to come to terms with the seeming chaos; to find meaning. Both cases require becoming engaged. Both are worth the effort.

Virgi Driscoll has served in many arts and arts education leadership positions at the local, state and national level, including as Executive Director of the Wisconsin Alliance for Arts Education. Her art work has been exhibited in local, state, regional and



national exhibitions. She has won awards for both her paintings and drawings as well as her leadership positions. She believes strongly that art is central to all learning and should be a required course of study within our schools.

Learn more about Virgi's art and arts advocacy at [www.virgidriscollart.com](http://www.virgidriscollart.com).

Jim Toth is a retired art educator, now in his sixth season as Next Act's volunteer gallery curator.

Untitled, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"



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## Did You Know?

In *A SMALL FIRE*, we welcome back three actors to our stage that you may recognize, but may not know how long they have been affiliated with Next Act.



**Mary MacDonald Kerr** will play Emily Bridges.

- Most recently seen on the Next Act stage in *TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR BIOLOGY TEACHER ABOUT EVOLUTION*
- Made her Next Act debut in *FOOL FOR LOVE* during the 1995-96 season
- *A SMALL FIRE* will be her 14<sup>th</sup> NAT production as an actor. She has directed eight productions for NAT, including *NO CHILD*.

**Jonathan Smoots** will play John Bridges.

- Most recently seen on the Next Act stage in *EQUIVOCATION*
- Artistic Director for the first two years of Next Act Theatre, co-directing the inaugural dual productions, *A WRINKLE IN TIME* and *RECKLESS*.
- *A SMALL FIRE* will be his 10<sup>th</sup> NAT production as an actor. He has directed the same number of productions with us.



**Emily Vitrano** will play Jenny Bridges.

- Made her Next Act [and Milwaukee] debut in *LOMBARDI: THE ONLY THING*

*A SMALL FIRE* is generously co-sponsored by Sandra Zingler & Barbara Johnson and The Briggs & Stratton Corporation Foundation