

Why 9 CIRCLES?

by David Ceasarini

During the first days of April, 2003, my beautiful, brilliant wife Deborah and I were anticipating the birth of our first child. Feeling her contractions coming stronger and more frequently, we checked into the Aurora birthing facility near UWM on Sunday night around 10 pm. Quite the lovely place. However, it seemed Miranda Ryan Ceasarini was somewhat reluctant to make her debut, as she didn't emerge until the wee hours of Tuesday morning. Yeah; that was long.

It was April 8; Deborah was understandably exhausted from her heroic ordeal, yet filtering through the fatigue was exhilaration and amazement at the new life we held in our arms.

In a rare moment of foresight, I had previously locked in an assistant to assume my BEA'S NIECE directing duties – soon to open at Next Act – should I be needed elsewhere. Good thing I did, because tech rehearsals began the morning our daughter was born and I was free to linger a few days with wife and child. As we dozed through the TV-lit twilight time of recovery, a memorable series of images began playing on hundreds of millions of sets worldwide, including the one in our room.

AWE, SHOCKS

Soon to be shown over and over in TV-news loops were the premiere images of the American military's procession through the streets of Baghdad, accompanied by thousands of joyous Iraq-

is: the wide, littered avenues, the crossed swords parade ground and finally, the toppling of that colossal statue of Iraq's dictatorial leader and the west's current villain, Saddam Hussein.

The predictions of a short, tidy, pre-emptive war seemed true. The air bombardment had gone uncontested. Resistance from the vaunted Republican Guard was sporadically tough, but fading; from the Iraqi regulars, practically non-existent. U.S. leaders' long-held desire for Middle East regime change and purposeful seed-sowing of democracy had finally been realized, and apparently, at a bargain price [for the Coalition anyway].



Firdos Square in Baghdad

But as new-mom Deborah and I brought our bundled baby home and began every parents' crash-course in infant care, the democra-seeds scattered between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were proving to be a hybrid mix, soon to sprout chaos, faction, vengeance and terror. Democracy would be crowded out for a while.

SHORT-SIGHTED

Planners had planned for war but not for peace. Cautionary, in-country expertise had been dismissed. The depth of the Sunni-Shia divide was misapprehended. Perhaps most challenging of all, the complement of occupying forces was far short of the number needed to establish lawful and safe conditions for a society suddenly reeling from its release from tyrannical rule.

Then there was the implication, if not outright invitation, that the fight against Islamist terror would be held in Iraq. They came. From Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Iran, Sudan. They came with IED's, suicide vests, checkpoint assaults, car bombs. They came, they sidled in amongst the growing turmoil, and ISIS was born.

Thank you if you are still reading these words. America's Desert Storm is a volatile subject for many. I only wish to summarize – in one extremely all-encompassing nutshell – what happened

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at the beginning, and more importantly, recall the scene of where we set down our U.S. soldiers in the spring of 2003.

THE BACKGROUND

This is the backdrop for Bill Cain's 9 CIRCLES: an asymmetrical war fought through confused identities, hidden motives, ambushes, ignorance, impatience, corruption, deception, and always present: the unknown. Death could come from anywhere, in the guise of a smiling taxi driver or hidden pipe of C4 explosive. And into this dangerous maelstrom came a young man already damaged from years of unbalanced upbringing, previously hardened against empathy and vulnerability. Growing up, his survival had depended on it.

As Cain says, 9 CIRCLES is not about war or Iraq, but the journey of a man discovering himself within the environment of war. His journey takes him from

darkness to an even blacker dark, before emerging into a blinding light of human understanding that he had never thought possible. It is a trying journey, yet transcendent, too – for the young man, for his military colleagues, and for us.

But the best part is that, along the way, while this mysterious and ever-engaging story unfolds, many probing questions and ideas are interrogated along the way: that's the Bill Cain guarantee. He will not quit until we've had the distinct pleasure of considering all angles of the event. And that's why, when I picked up his play to read for the first time, it remained clutched in my hand till the last page was turned.

See you at the theatre.



Teaching the Unthinkable How 9 CIRCLES Fits in a Classroom by Grace DeWolff

My nephew was only about ten years old when he got into science fiction horror movies. Being a caring and sensitive guy, he ran into some conflict between his emotions and the stories he was passionate about: I tried to get him to watch *Starship Troopers* and he has never forgiven me. So when he showed a desperate interest in the movie *Alien*, his mom told him he could only watch it if he got through all of the "making-of" special features first. It worked. Once he knew what all the props were made of, how the puppets were operated, and most importantly, how the actors felt about their time filming the movie, he could experience horror from the safety of knowing the facts.

The principle of the 9 CIRCLES pre-and-post-show workshops is the same: it is my goal to offer our students a way to make the conscious choice to turn on their critical thinking brains rather than allowing their empathetic imaginations to run away with their emotions.

Casey Hoekstra (who plays the main character, Daniel Reeves, in 9 CIRCLES) and I were actors together during last season's *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*. I was delighted with his exuberance in the classroom during workshops. Once high school classrooms started signing up for the 9 CIRCLES matinee,



I knew I had to get Casey on board with our education programming. It is my intention that, if there are moments in the play that get too emotionally difficult for our youngest audiences, they can focus on Casey the actor rather than Reeves the character.

I'm thirty-two years old this year, and just reading 9 CIRCLES was emotionally tough for me. It is not my intention to shield our students from these emotions, or spare them the journey, but rather to give them the coping tools and resilience they need to make it through.

P.S. My nephew is now 18 and hasn't strayed from his passion for filmmaking. He majored in it at his arts high school where he directed his final project "Space Snakes", a spoof on sci-fi action adventure movies. He is, in a word, the coolest.

We need transportation! Next Act is seeking a 12- or 15-passenger van and someone to drive it for its Next Actors summer tour. We would need the van between July 13 and 18, 2020.

Do you have a van or know someone who does? Please contact Grace DeWolff, Education Manager, Next Act Theatre, PO Box 394, Milwaukee, WI 53201 or grace@nextact.org.

The Carnival's Coming to Town!

by Jane Flieller

Step right up ... and help the company that puts on the greatest show(s) on earth!!

I am very excited to announce our annual fundraising event, **Bravo, Next Act, 2020!** will be held on **Thursday, April 30th**. Join us as we pull out all the stops and host a carnival-themed event to help raise money to support Next Act's artistic and educational programming.

HOW ABOUT I TAKE YOU ON A LITTLE TOUR?

For those who purchase a VIP Pass (\$95), the evening begins at 5:15pm. With a complimentary cocktail in hand, join Producing Artistic Director, David Ceasarini and Next Act favorite Jonathan Smoots as they take you on a fun-filled trip down memory lane, exploring the past 30 years of Next Act's history. Then we'll draw back the curtain for VIP guests to enjoy the first glimpse of our fabulous silent auction!

For those who purchase a general admission ticket (\$75), the gala kicks off at 6pm with scrumptious popcorn, delicious hors d'oeuvres, games, prizes, tarot card readings, photo ops and more! You can enjoy a wine pull, too!

Of course, no carnival would be complete without a dunk tank, right!? Warm up that throwing arm and try your hand at DUNKIN' DAVID. Get Producing Artistic Director David Ceasarini all wet – again and again!

The second half of the evening takes guests into the theatre for a live auction featuring unique items such as a Murder Mystery Dinner Theatre Package right on the stage for up to twelve people or a Sensational Lebanese Dinner and Tiki Bar



Experience! Following a short presentation about all the arts education initiatives Next Act is doing, we wrap up the evening with a magic show featuring Milwaukee legend David Seebach, as he dazzles and amazes you, and a medley of music with Milwaukee's very own Steve Koehler (Northern Sky, In Tandem Theatre, Skylight Music Theatre, Next Act Theatre), Bree Beelow (First Stage Children's Theatre, Next Act Theatre), and Eva Nimmer (Northern Sky, Next Act Theatre). You may have had the opportunity to see Bree and Eva in this season's *THE REVOLUTIONISTS!*

Don't miss this amazing night of thrills and chills! Tickets are available now by calling 414-278-0765 or visit nextact.org! Space is limited so call today!

Join the Next Act Team



For every season, turn, turn, turn ... your bicycle wheels, that is! It's that time again to sign up for the United Performing Arts Fund's (UPAF) Ride for the Arts, sponsored by Miller Lite. This year's fun will

take place on **Sunday, May 31, 2020** with a number of ways to participate, several routes from which to choose, and plenty of fun to be had – all while helping support the performing arts in Milwaukee. As a Next Act team member, half of all pledges you raise will go directly to our share of UPAF funding. Go to www.upaf.org to join Next Act's team – registration is now open!



During the planning process for *9 CIRCLES*, we reached out to a unique, local arts organization called Feast of Crispian (FoC)*. Their mission is dedicated to working with veterans of military service and as such, has been an indispensable community partner, helping us understand circumstances and issues in Bill Cain's play from a veteran's perspective.

Two special preview conversations were held on



Nancy Smith-Watson & Casey Hoekstra read a scene from *9 CIRCLES*

Photo: A.J. Magoon

February 11 and 25, at which the audience heard selected scenes from *9 CIRCLES* and then participated in free-wheeling and insightful discussions. In addition to the many veterans in the audience, particular expertise was provided by Guy Temple, a former Air Force Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps lawyer, and Marine Mark Ard.

The director of *9 CIRCLES*, Michael Cotey, was in attendance and remarked, "Wow, this kind of detailed discussion, questioning and digging into the text and issues is just like the first days of rehearsal! It's exciting to already be this far into the conversation with three weeks to go before we begin."

We wish to thank all the veterans and FoC leaders James Tasse and Nancy Smith-Watson for giving us this valuable opportunity to begin our *9 CIRCLES* journey.

*FoC takes its name from Shakespeare's *HENRY THE FIFTH*, mentioned as the day that the King's small army, "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers," will face the much larger French forces at the Battle of Agincourt.

About Feast of Crispian

Feast of Crispian (FoC) is a Milwaukee-born theater-based organization that primarily supports veterans who are challenged by a range of military service related issues from PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) to reintegration. Since 2013, FoC has been working inside the Zablocki VA Hospital offering 16 hour-long workshops in acting Shakespeare with the focus on creating a safe, supported space for the participants to fully explore and express a full range of emotions.

Military training is designed to suppress emotions in order to foster group cohesion and the ability to work through high stress situations. PTSD further complicates the normal experiencing and expression of human emotions creating poor relationships from domestic life to job expectations. Using the poetic, expressive language of Shakespeare's plays



Feast of Crispian members perform *JULIUS CAESAR* at Next Act Theatre

Photo: Sara Statkus



Feast of Crispian members perform *AND COMES SAFE HOME*

Photo: Kenny Yoo

that tell stories familiar to contemporary warriors, veterans are given a chance to reconnect to their feelings, their empathy, and to their imaginations which can help them see the possibility of a different outcome to their current challenges.

FoC holds events inside and outside the VA hospital, has weekly drop-in meetings and collaborates with many other arts and health organizations around Eastern Wisconsin, as well as teaching and presenting this life-saving work all over the United States. Next Act Theatre has been a friend and collaborator with FoC since 2015.

Go to www.feastofcrispian.org for more information.

(I asked playwright Bill Cain for his thoughts on 9 CIRCLES, with particular focus on how he came to write it. Having been asked for about 500 words, Bill's penchant for exactitude produced this enumerated and enlightening essay. -David C.)

Fact fiction crime punishment salvation damnation dante hell heaven purgatory.

10 words.

A story about a war crime appears in the paper.

I ignore it. Too painful. Turn the page.

The story develops.

The man who committed the atrocity is 18 and got baptized during basic.

"Baptized" interests me. Why?

He is condemned by the president who started the atrocity of the war.

The story develops.

The soldier went to see a psychiatrist before the killing trying to stop himself.

I start to write about the story. Absolute fiction. I do not know the man. But there is something here - a story trying to tell itself. A young man in a war machine tries to stop the national killing impulse by stopping himself - something the president should have done and didn't.

How many words is that?

141.

I follow the event. I read the hometown papers of all the men involved. Hardscrabble stories. Oil riggers. Drop outs.

I read about the love for a beloved sergeant who was killed.

I watch a movie based on the events. It portrays the soldier as a monster. The soldier. Not the men financing the war. Profiting from the war. The film wins an award at Cannes.

I write more fictional circles trying to understand - sure I can never understand.

More stories. Soldiers killed, decapitated. The brutality of the enemy. But it turns out that that brutality was revenge for the atrocity of the 18 year old.

Violence concatenates.

Who will stop it?

Who even tried?

The soldier.

How can the violent criminal be the sanest person in the scenario?

He pays for his crime.

Life in prison.

The men who started the war retire in luxury. The president becomes a painter and paints pictures of soldiers wounded in the senseless war he started. How can he paint and still not see?

The soldier serves life.

Hangs himself.

What was he doing?

Despairing? Atoning?

Did he ever come to an understanding of what he did?

He converted to Catholicism in prison so he was working on it somehow.

What was the journey? What was the destination?

I grieve his death in the death of my fictional character going through 9 circles.

And the current president pardons criminals who [witnesses say] did the same and the president proclaims them heroes.

And suddenly the painter president seems benign by comparison.

Is there a word for something worse than atrocity?

But the soldier is dead.

His victims are dead.

9 circles in Dante yield to 9 more and 9 more after that.

You eventually arrive at love that moves the universe.

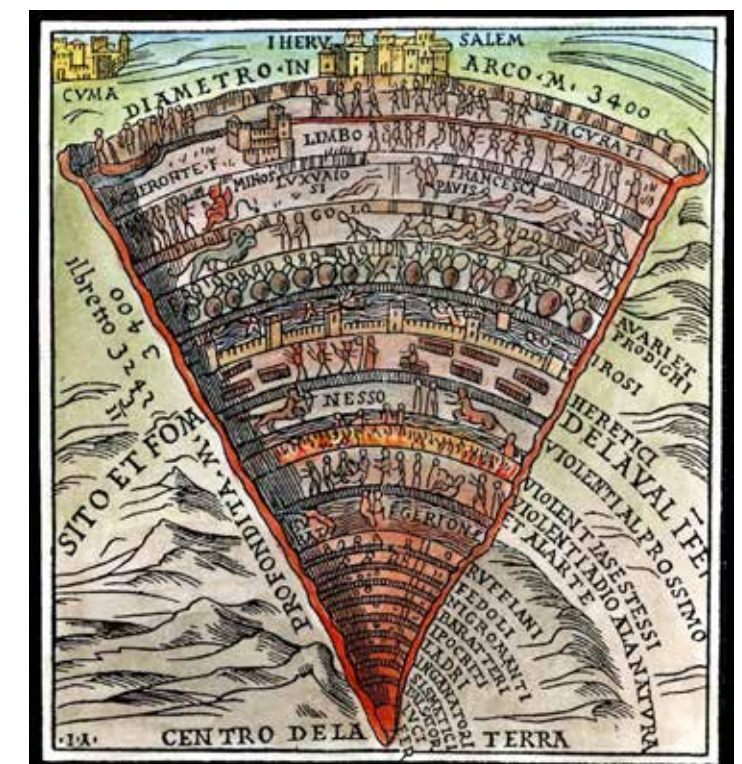
May the soldier and his victims and the country - both countries - find their way to the journey's end.

456.

Close enough.

Years after writing *9 Circles* - still trying to understand -

Bill Cain



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. 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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Editors A.J. Magoon & David Ceasarini Layout Rose Delaney

As depicted in the play **9 CIRCLES**, the



search for truth and justice is a many layered pursuit, often influenced by the searcher's perspective as much as an objective reality. In a court, the desired outcome is a verdict; a conclusion; a determination of guilt or innocence. But, even then there are layers of guilt and layers of innocence. We live in a layered world of nuanced and shifting revelations. The art of Jean Dexter Sobon, our featured artist, embodies this reality.

"On the surface my artworks are narratives. They tell stories. Some tell multiple stories through my use of layered or juxtaposed images. Additionally, below the surface, each artwork is also a tool for self-questioning and understanding... Stories take on life, become active in time through their telling and hearing... But, as happens in dreams, the objects, colors, people, places, sounds and sensations used in stories and art can exist also as



symbols; symbols that often carry multiple meanings... You, the viewer, are part of the narrative of every artwork you confront. The artist begins the work that you will finish."

Jean holds BS and MS degrees in Art Education from UWM. She taught art in the public schools of Whitefish Bay and Germantown, WI from 1976 to 2003 when she retired to focus on her artwork. Her award-winning work is represented in numerous private and corporate collections nationwide. We are honored to be able to share her art with the Next Act community.

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

Did You Know?

9 CIRCLES is inspired by real events related to Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, part of the Army's 101st Airborne Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Bravo Company was stationed in what was referred to as the "Triangle of Death," south of Baghdad and northeast of the Euphrates River in Iraq.

Thousands of people – soldiers and civilians alike – died between 2003 and 2005 due to sectarian violence resulting from tension between the Sunni population and the insurgency.

The 502nd Infantry was known as the Black Heart Brigade.

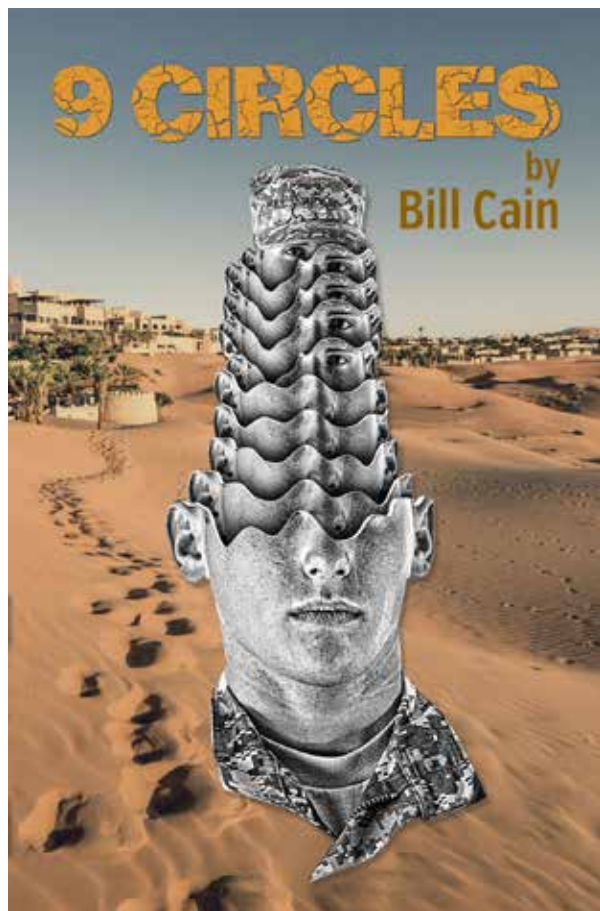




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April 2 - 26, 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
For tickets call 414-278-0765 or visit nextact.org				2 Preview 7:30	3 Opening 7:30	4 4:30 P 8:00
5 2:00 T			8 1:30 7:30 P/T	9 7:30 T	10 7:30	11 4:30 8:00 B
12 2:00 P/T			15 1:30 7:30 T	16 7:30 P/T	17 7:30	18 4:30 8:00
19 2:00 P/T	20 PWYC 7:30		22 7:30 T	23 7:30 T	24 7:30 P	25 4:30 8:00
26 Closing 2:00	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback B - Next On Tap... Beer Tasting PWYC - Pay What You Can					

Active service members and all veterans are offered \$5 tickets to any performance of 9 CIRCLES. Call the box office or use the code **MILVET5** at checkout online to redeem this offer. Fees apply.

AFTERMATH by Jessica Blank & Eric Jensen

A special reading presentation.

Displaced Iraqi citizens tell their intimate stories of escape and survival in the wake of the Coalition invasion of 2003.

"...demanding the courtesy of your attention." - *The New York Times*

Sunday, April 19 & 26 • 6PM • at Next Act Theatre

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