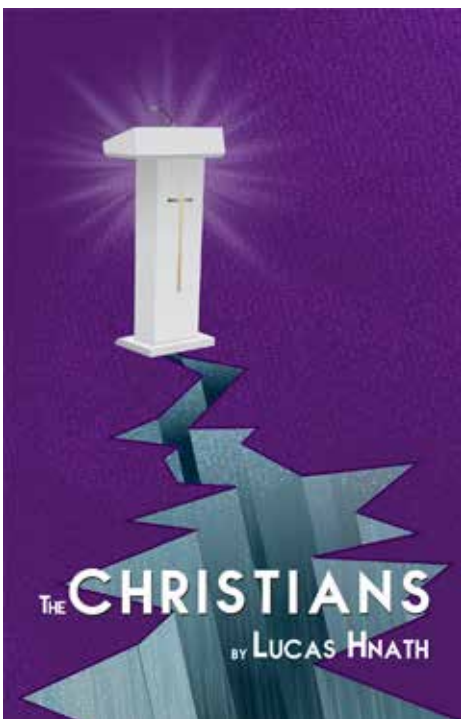


WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

by David Ceccarini

*Well ... we are here.
Where is here?
Here is –*

So begins Pastor Paul's message to his congregation in Lucas Hnath's *THE CHRISTIANS*, the first Next Act offering coming up in our 31st season. Paul is preparing his congregation for a big change in the church's philosophy, and he finds the need to place everything in context before getting to the news. It's funny: I'll be playing Pastor Paul in our show, which I'm very much looking forward to, but I find that I'm already adapting his approach to storytelling, starting with another of his quotes, "I have a powerful urge to communicate, but I find the distance between us insurmountable."



INTIMACY ON HOLD

I can tell you, this powerful urge to communicate is buzzing, vibrating, resonating within the bodies and souls of thousands of performing artists right now. Due to the highly intimate nature of live theatre, the entire performing arts industry has been closed down. Over the course of a few months, a devastating series of closures and cancellations rolled across the country, as one by one, productions, summer festivals and full seasons fell to the coronavirus. As you readers well know, Next Act was forced to cancel its last subscription offering of the season, but due to the enormous generosity of our subscribers, most of that ticket revenue was converted to donations. While this has allowed for a temporary stabilization, exactly how the arts will "re-open" is anybody's guess. The most-uttered phrase these days is, "We just don't know." As usual, the artists are most vulnerable and are being hit the hardest.

TIME TO REMEMBER

Certainly, Albert Einstein never needed our help to prove his theories, but recently, I think it's safe to say that we've all experienced palpable proof of the elasticity, the relativity of time.

Many times I've heard people say things like, "this year called March" or "back when everything was different – last week." Many events packed within a limited time frame have expanded our perception of time, and it takes a concerted effort to recall what

was going on before we fell into the time tunnel. But, let's try.

September 27, 2019 saw the opening of Next Act's 30th season with Lauren Gunderson's female French adventure, *THE REVOLUTIONISTS*. Powered by a stellar cast and dynamic director – Laura Gordon – Gunderson's uplifting tale of activist feminism challenging the terrorizing powers-that-be kicked off our season in high gear with strong sales and your effusive praise.



THE NEXT SHOW OF SHOWS

Quickly following that success came a visit from a welcome old friend, Neil Simon's *LAUGHTER ON THE 23rd FLOOR*. My personal, joyful journey of revisiting the brilliance of Sid Caesar and his Show of Shows was enhanced many times over by the daily

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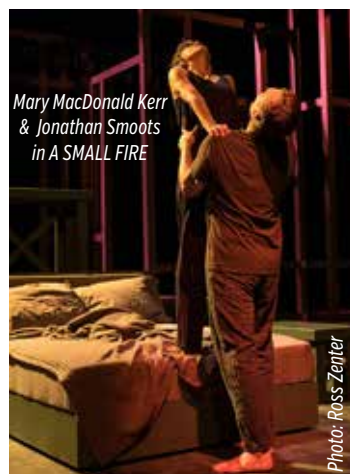
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shenanigans of eight shamelessly funny actors and trusted director and friend Edward Morgan. The world had recently grown poorer for the loss of Mr. Simon, and it was our privilege to remind audiences yet again of his comedic craft and heartfelt storytelling.

December 31, first public reports of respiratory disease in Wuhan, China.

January 7, 2020. Rehearsals for *A SMALL FIRE* began as we embraced the welcome return of Mary MacDonald Kerr to the Next Act rehearsal hall, joined by Jonathan Smoots, Mark Corkins and Emily Vitrano. Our smart, focused cast concentrated feverishly on the task of unraveling the secrets of this tricky play, yielding an ensemble performance infused with skill, depth and the actor's courage to go beyond safety.



Mary MacDonald Kerr & Jonathan Smoots in *A SMALL FIRE*

Photo: Ross Zentler

February 23 brought this beautiful show to a close. By this time, news of coronavirus had moved from three stories down in the news report queue to the very top. The first United States COVID-19 case had been identified in Seattle a month earlier, and the virus was now making daily headlines and wreaking havoc in Asia and Europe.

March 10, rehearsals began for Bill Cain's *9 CIRCLES*, the taut, multi-faceted dramatization of what war can do to one young man, or to any of us, if put in the wrong circumstances. With his cast and production designers, ace director Michael Cotey started to dig into this incredibly powerful and challenging work. As we analyzed the script during the first few days, there was an acceleration: the NCAA announced a basketball tournament with no fans. The next day, the NBA called a halt to their season. The day after that, the NCAA cancelled outright. Events began tumbling.

Monday, March 16: Social distancing guidelines were circulating; the Next Act board meeting that evening was held at a distance in the theatre space. Earlier that day, the central actor of *9 CIRCLES* had presented flu symptoms and was awaiting a test.



David Cecsarini in *LAUGHTER ON THE 23rd FLOOR*

Photo: Ross Zentler

Fortunately, he later tested negative, but by that time rehearsals were suspended, and office staff immediately made plans to work from home. The rehearsal hall would see no further play-building activity and sits idle to this day.



Nancy Smith Watson, Marine Sergeant Mark Ard, James Tasse & David Cecsarini during our *Inside the Circle* event

Photo: A.J. Magoon

As we fast-forward to today, the culmination of successive events have included the postponement and eventual cancellation of *9 CIRCLES*, 600 phone calls to subscribers, massive patron generosity, re-scheduling the next season's shows, contingency planning, video creations and adapting our new favorite saying, "Well, we *still* don't know."

And then George Floyd was murdered in plain daylight by Minneapolis police for passing a counterfeit twenty. This grievous act has filled our streets with renewed protests of pain and rage against systemic injuries and injustices to black Americans we have yet to reckon with.

WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

We are committed to a Next Act 2020-21 season. We have an extremely dedicated core administrative staff working on education programs, grant writing, current and future publicity, subscription processing and database management – all the work that would be necessary under normal conditions. This has been made possible by the federal government's CARES Act and the Paycheck Protection Program, as well as by the generosity of you, our patrons.

We have resolved to make plans, to put them into effect and be ready to change them should the virus dictate. But the short story is, our powerful urge to communicate with you through our work will not be easily suppressed. Nor do we think that YOUR urge to engage in that communication is dampened; if anything, we've heard from many that the appetite grows sharper by the day.

We **will** see you at the theatre.

A Summer Soirée ... with Next Act Theatre

Jane Flieller, Development Director

Summer is here and that's a great time to get together with friends to catch up. So let's have ourselves a little cocktail party on paper! Grab your favorite summer beverage, pull up a chair and join the fun as we toast to Next Act Theatre and you!

Toast #1: To Your Generosity

We can't thank you enough for the generosity you've shown us over the past few months as our worlds have turned upside down. From those in a position to turn back tickets for *9 CIRCLES* and Bravo 2020 to your generous monetary gifts, you helped us close up the 2019-20 season, our 30th anniversary, in far better shape than we dreamed possible. *Cheers!*

Toast #2: To The Future!

It's been a crazy couple of months, but who better to handle it than crazy artists and their crazy patrons? We are resilient and resourceful and along with your patronage and support, there's nothing we can't handle. So we'll be back to creating memory-filled moments of theatrical delight before you know it – thanks to you! *Cheers!*



Toast #3: To Our Show Sponsors – Could That Be You??

The season is selected and that means it's time to round up our show sponsors! Sponsors fill a unique role in providing funding that directly supports the needs of a particular production. Different tiers are available – contact me at jane@nextact.org to receive more information. Consider going in on a sponsorship with a friend or your place of business. *Cheers!*

Toast #4: To Our Exciting Producer's Circle Patrons – Care To Join Us?

Have you heard about the Producer's Circle? It's a level of annual giving that comes with great benefits. For your annual gift of \$1,000 or more, you not only glow with the knowledge that you are a major force in bringing our programming to life, but you receive drink tickets for use at every performance attended, invitations to exclusive events and recognition in our playbills and events! *Cheers!*

Next Actors: Online 2020

Grace DeWolff, Education Manager

Health and safety concerns continue with in-person gatherings due to the presence of COVID-19 in Wisconsin. We didn't feel safe scheduling an on-site summer session with our Next Actors students. However, with supportive and enthusiastic feedback from our alumni, we have created an online summer program focused on the playwriting process – free for any high school student or Next Actor alum to join.

We held a Next Actors alumni meeting in May, where students brainstormed ideas for the summer. Musical podcasts were mentioned, along with projects they've already done at school through the video conferencing app Zoom. The consensus among teenagers (and, I venture to guess, everyone) is that Zoom chats can get exhausting. In response, I think we've built an online summer curriculum that students will enjoy participating in, including:

- weekly live video chats
- short, daily video messages through an app called Flipgrid that can be recorded any time in response to a video prompt
- keeping pen-and-ink journals

- tracking our physical activity goals
- writing and collaborating through Google Docs

Ultimately, our goal is to create an original piece performed by the students themselves. Their performance will be recorded, edited and uploaded online in August.

The students are hopeful that by the end of July, perhaps there will be a way to safely get together in-person for some activities - just maybe not everyone all at once. They're already brainstorming creative solutions for a live audience experience, if that's available to us by the end of the summer. I have utmost confidence in our young people to be the incredibly resilient and creative students they always have been and I look forward to experiencing the art they'll create this summer.



Next Actors, 2019

When the lights come up on stage and a performance begins, the audience sees what has taken months to achieve. From the decision to produce a play to the final curtain call, it takes a small army of professionals to bring a show to fruition. But there is also a cadre of people whose work you don't necessarily see on stage but is vital to the final product. In addition to staff, many front-of-house volunteers, and our amazing patrons and donors, a group of dedicated volunteers make up our Board of Directors. These individuals commit their time and resources to the fiscal well-being and management of Next Act Theatre. Board members support its mission by spreading the word about our work to family, friends and colleagues, and they provide oversight of the organization. We would like to introduce you now to two of our amazing board members!



David Anderson, Board President

I was born in Milwaukee and have spent all of my adult life here. I've liked theater since a second grade field trip to a play. I don't remember the play but I recall seeing real people in bright costumes – so much better than television in 1954! My professional background is in 40 years of designing computer systems which is pretty analytical. I'm not personally artistic but I get real enjoyment from attending live theatre.

My wife and I were introduced to Next Act back in the 1990's. Some friends invited us to meet them for dinner and a show. We started attending individual productions but soon had season tickets. I've particularly enjoyed the fact that most of Next Act's shows are new to me; Ibsen is ok, but I don't need to see *A DOLL'S HOUSE* again.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I joined the board in 2012. Next Act was looking for new members when a then current member suggested me after seeing my name on a subscriber list. I love [Next Act's] space and the shows David [Cecsarini, Producing Artistic Director] chooses to present: timely, intimate and powerful. These days, we bring guests to the Saturday matinees and then go to dinner for a great discussion about the play.

I feel that an important part of being a board member is to be an advocate for the theatre, to support it by talking to others, encouraging them to come and sense the intimacy of our space – to feel the emotions and the experience of our productions.



Joyce Mielke, Board Secretary

A lifelong resident of Milwaukee, I live with my sister in our family home in Bay View. I hold a Master's degree in Statistics from Western Michigan University which led me to a teaching career in mathematics at Shorewood High School. Following work in the computer industry, I went to work for Briggs & Stratton, from where I am now retired.

My manager at Briggs & Stratton was a big fan of Next Act Theatre and in 2006, he suggested that I attend a show which I did and voila, I'm still here! I always loved the theatre though I never acted in a play or worked behind the scenes [though I suspect I would be much better working behind the scenes!] I was asked by the Briggs & Stratton Foundation if I would be interested in serving on Next Act's Board as a representative of the company. I said, "Yes!" and still serve to this day.

I have appreciated gaining "behind the scenes" insight into what it takes to produce quality theatre and manage its financial aspects with the dedication and attention to detail that David [Cecsarini, Producing Artistic Director] and former Managing Director Charles Kakuk, who sadly passed six years ago, have done for so many years.

I believe in contributing to our community. My work with Next Act as well as years of service on the board of Literacy Services allows me to contribute to creating a strong community and a thriving economy, which is very important to me.

If you are interested in learning more about Board of Director service at Next Act Theatre, please feel free to reach out to Jane Flieller, Development Director, at jane@nextact.org.

Now is the time to start thinking about philanthropy and tax planning for 2020. The COVID-19 situation has had a major impact on many organizations including Next Act's primary education program, Next Actors, the five-week total immersion workshop for high school students; a program which deserves continuing support. [A modified, virtual program has been planned for summer 2020.]

In past years at the spring gala Bravo Next Act, my wife and I challenged attendees to contribute to Next Act's education efforts. Even though the gala had to be canceled this year, we are happy to announce that we will still issue the same challenge. **We will match, dollar for dollar, the first \$5,000 of contributions pledged or received by September 1, 2020 for Next Act's 2021 arts education initiatives, including Next Actors!**

You might also be asking yourself, **"How can I make a contribution in the most efficient and affordable manner?"** Here are a few ways to stretch your giving dollars:

- Recent stimulus-based legislative measures provide for an additional tax deduction of \$300 for charitable contributions during the 2020 tax year for all taxpayers, regardless of income bracket. Why not make a contribution of \$300 or more to Next Act and have it matched by the aforementioned challenge from the Krause Family?
- That legislation also removed Required Minimum Distributions (RMD's) from IRA's and 401k plans for individuals over 70 ½ years of age for the 2020 tax year. In the past, this has been an ideal way to direct money to favorite charities [Qualified Charitable Contributions], to reduce taxable income and minimize Medicare premium adjustments. Have no fear: RMD's will return in the near future. But don't let that stop you from making a matching contribution this year!



- If you were fortunate to capitalize on the investment market's volatility or have experienced a significant taxable event [i.e. the sale of a private company, etc.], a contribution of appreciated securities to a Community Foundation Advised Fund may be advisable. A current year charitable tax deduction of up to 30% of Adjusted Gross Income is allowed and you are not required to report as taxable income any gain on the gifted securities. A Community Foundation invests funds and distributes "advised" amounts to various charitable organizations, at your suggestion, for many years in the future. By doing this, one can switch from itemizing to a standard deduction in future years while minimizing income taxes and maintaining a level flow of funds to one's favorite charities.

Be sure to review these suggestions and other cost effective methods for charitable giving with your financial advisor or tax consultant to find what is right for you.



Next Actors, 2019

One of the greatest unknowns we are wrestling with today is the question of how to return safely to the rehearsal hall to create next season's stories. Before we are ready to invite an audience to return within our theatre's walls, we must first assemble an onstage story in rehearsal. To do our jobs, actors must speak and move in close proximity to one another. Directors and stage managers must freely converse and interact with artists, technicians and crew. Even protected by masks, we aren't ready to do that yet.

Once necessary conditions are satisfied, such as a lower rate of diagnosis and widespread testing for confirmation, we could return to the rehearsal hall in preparation for our November-December show, *THE CHRISTIANS*. There, we will implement a strict regimen of health monitoring, surface cleaning and increased air-handling capacity, as well as the maintenance of physical distancing and masks.

Regarding audiences, current municipal guidelines require that assemblies must be limited in number, following recommendations based upon square footage and a percentage of overall venue capacity. Because the virus is transmitted primarily through airborne mini-particles, we are studying our facility's air handling capacity and enhanced filtration. But to be clear, we will not open our doors until our safety protocol measures match or exceed the most up-to-date standards.

The coronavirus continues to signal its determination to occupy the country, while we see more opening dates throughout the performing arts community being pushed back. Conditions have inevitably brought the

theatre world into the realm of the virtual for the time being. Beginning with short video messages from artists and managers, performing arts companies are now exploring the infant art of producing a play, a musical or concert with absolutely no one in the same room. As we plan contingencies for the coming season, Next Act will also delve into the creative possibilities that this alternate technological medium can offer.

Like our colleagues, Next Act is committed to bringing our patrons the 2020-21 season in the highest quality possible. Whether it's through active video or live performance, the 2020-21 season is still ON. With any luck, we will finish the season with the joyous comedy *RED HERRING* in front of large crowds of hungry theatre fans! We look forward to sharing it all with you.

Now, more than ever, we thank you for your understanding and tremendous support.



While 2020 has been a year of change— much of it uncertain and difficult to deal with – there's one big change we are glad to see happening! As previously announced, Renaissance Theaterworks [RTW] will be moving in to share our performing space starting with their upcoming 2020-21 season.

As RTW says, "Recognizing a gender imbalance within professional theater, Suzan Fete, Marie Kohler, Raeleen McMillion, Jennifer Rupp and Michele Traband founded RTW in 1993 to produce excellent theatrical work while actively promoting the careers of women onstage and off." Since then, the company has been helping to promote and pursue gender parity in the arts and society all over the world. RTW is currently led by Managing Director Lisa Rasmussen and Artistic Director Suzan Fete.



Renaissance Theaterworks will open their 2021 season with MUTHALAND in their new home at the Next Act Theatre space. Single tickets will go on sale at our box office on September 1, 2020.

Of course, RTW and Next Act have shared performance space before: the two companies have a history of collaboration spanning back to the 1990s, including sharing space at the Stiemke Theater in the Milwaukee Repertory Theater complex and at The Off-Broadway. Next Act's Producing Artistic Director David stated, "We look forward to hosting RTW's productions once again, and even though there is significant crossover between our audiences, we anticipate the added benefit of introducing even more people to more good theatre."



Starting in late 2020 with the opening of Next Act's 2020-21 season, our home at 255 S. Water Street is going to become a hub for more quality Milwaukee theatre than you've ever seen here before. While the circumstances will lead to changes, we look forward to sharing our space with Renaissance and sharing the work of two excellent Milwaukee theatre companies with you in a safe, intentional and engaging way.

The UPAF 2020 Virtual Ride for the Arts

by David Ceccarini

We've done it again!

Patrons, friends and family partnerships with the Next Act/Ceccarini team have contributed over \$5,300 to this year's UPAF Ride. In eight years of pedaling, I believe that's the new record for gifts.

Many thanks to everyone who put the wind in our sails for this year's extra-special Virtual Ride.

I do have a quibble with that term Virtual. We used real bikes, went on real pathways and roads, and our real legs were tired and derrières were weary after all those virtual miles.

Because of current pandemic conditions, the Ride went a bit differently this year. The Ceccarinis actually went in three waves: I rode on Saturday, June 13th, Deborah and Amalia rode Sunday with her friend Tessa and dad, and then Miranda and boyfriend Abe booked their 25 miles a few days later. It was very relaxed and a nice change of

pace from the usual downtown, crowd-the-Hoan Bridge scramble.

On my round trip to Port Washington, I shot a bunch of video clips. We're putting them together as a sort of summary story of my bike adventure for your viewing pleasure? We'll send out a link to the video when it's done so you can ride along with me.

Ah ha! Now *there's* your Virtual Ride!



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