

## Why THE CHRISTIANS?

by David Ceccarini

**In August of 1999**, the 30th to be exact, Deborah Staples – in front of so many of our dear friends, family members and colleagues – agreed to step into a lifetime partnership with me.

The wedding celebration was held at Wintergreen, “the ski hill,” on the south bank of the Wisconsin River across from Spring Green. Naturally it was held on a Monday, since Deborah was in the midst of her APT season and Next Act was in rehearsals for *HAUPTMANN*. This caused us to delay the typical post-wedding honeymoon until well into October, when I had the bright idea that visiting Glacier National Park would be just the thing.

OK, besides the snow, the possible presence of our grizzly bear friends and the complete lack of iconic bighorn sheep scampering across mountaintops, it wasn't too bad. Looking back, that singular, solitary blue grouse sitting on the forest floor as we hiked by, bear-whooping, was pretty impressive, if only for its impudent, beady-eyed stare. That's when Deborah, in one of her first executive actions in the partnership, established the mutual goal of a real honeymoon to be taken in the not-too-distant future.

### OFF TO EUROPE

Well, two years later, it was all planned. We headed for a European adventure just weeks after the terrorist attacks on New York, D.C. and Pennsylvania. Never a dull moment with us. It must be said, though, that throughout Holland, France



and Italy\*, we really didn't have any sense of heightened danger during the trip, other than the presence of Italian soldiers sporting their automatic rifles at the train stations. Of course there were still the usual dangers of pickpockets, tourist prices and an overabundance of museums and cathedrals.

One such cathedral is in Florence: it's one of the largest churches on earth. It took 140 years to build, and much longer to completely finish the façade. No doubt, many readers have been to the enormous Duomo al Firenze, with its tri-color white, pink and green marble cladding, gorgeous vaulted ceilings and the third tallest dome in the world, topping out at 375.5 feet above the cobbles below. Combined with its innumerable artworks, soaring dimensions and layer upon layer of history – both religious and architectural – the building is truly a testament to the determination, ambition, vision, engineering, craftsmanship and faith of its human creators.

### IT'S HUGE

As you stand in the nave [the center where the two main structures cross] you can look up to see the dome's interior, starting about 100 feet above your own. Covering this massive, eight-sided structure is a fresco painting which depicts The Last Judgment, as described in Christian tradition. From that far away, you can tell that there's a lot going on in the six rings of figures and events. But it's not until you climb the hundreds of steps taking you up to the walkway around the dome's base that you see the enormity of the work. It covers 38,750 square feet; that's a canvas the length of a football field and 129 feet tall.

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**YIKES**

Not being well-versed in Christian and Catholic theology, I can only guess at all the stories these artists have told – and are still telling – with their monumental work. But in the lowest ring of figures and goings-on just above our upturned heads, there are some unmistakable images of a classic, fiery-furnace and brimstone-slingin’ Hell. Nasty, snarling beasts are busily chasing their wretched prey toward molten caves. What can only be demons are pouring burning liquid down the throats of hapless individuals marked for a roasting eternity. The roiling backdrop of intense reds and yellows, punctuated by torturing monsters and grotesquely twisted faces of doomed souls, give the impression that the heat is intense, intolerable, and impossibly everlasting.

And this fate, many Christians believe, awaits all those who do not come to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. And they don’t just mean other Christians; they mean all mankind.

**THE PLAY**

In a 2015 interview, playwright Lucas Hnath said, “I knew I wanted to write a play about a very large church, because as a child, I went to a very large church.” In his play *THE CHRISTIANS*, Hnath has fulfilled that wish. He takes us to Pastor Paul’s mega-church one auspicious Sunday, where Paul delivers, not so much a sermon, but a change of mind and heart to his congregation of thousands. Paul’s radical change in philosophy runs squarely into absolutist doctrine already in place. The conflict brings upon the church an extreme test of belief and loyalty, and results in a schism with serious repercussions for all involved. Hnath comments: “When you have people who are absolutists coming together in a play, it becomes a testing ground for ideas.”

I believe I’ve mentioned before that my time in the pews at Brookfield United Methodist Church

during the 1960s did not result in my adherence to the faith. [Perhaps the only way in which this son has disappointed his mom.] Nevertheless, I find the ideas in this play completely engaging, and further, the personal crises that characters are grappling with, humanly compelling. Pastor Paul’s revelation is deeply felt and rendered with eloquence, but as a convert to a new idea, he is blind to the damage and hurt he will cause. Joshua, the Associate Pastor, pushes back in front of the entire congregation, and the debate becomes a public display and competition for power. The drama is firmly-rooted in Hnath’s “testing ground.”

**AS THE INSIDER**

In that 2015 interview, Hnath was asked how the play was going over, among Christians and non-Christians alike. He said he was careful to not make the play about, “Do you believe in Christianity or not,” but about an internal, doctrinal argument which, in effect, brings reluctant audience members inside the belief rather than letting them sit outside of it. Hnath quips, “Not that agnostics or atheists convert when they watch the play, but that’s where the stakes are.”

The “stakes” center upon the question of the existence of Hell. Christian doctrine holds that questioning the existence of hell is heresy, and the Inclusion Doctrine [all are saved] is simply the same heresy by a new name. One current champion of Inclusion is Bishop Carlton Pearson, an African-American Baptist who, over many years, had formed a huge church in Tulsa, OK, in the 1990s. Pearson had a similar change of heart to Hnath’s Pastor Paul, and though this is not Pearson’s story, his is perhaps the most well-known incidence of a crisis in belief which took down an institution.

**JUST WHAT WE NEED**

One final thought: at the outset, Hnath’s characters are absolutists, and yet through the course of the conflict, the search for progress and peace with one another leads them to introspection, self-doubt, and a more generous place of understanding the other. In the end, there is nothing absolute in the ideas, or the people. There is only questioning, hope and love. What a terrific play.

I’m left with this question: I wonder whether *THE CHRISTIANS* would have shaken up the Florentine world beneath that massive dome, all those centuries ago? I suppose much would have depended upon the translation: Italian or Latin?

See you at the [video] theatre!

**PRODUCER’S CIRCLE**

by Jane Flieller

**pro·duc·er** (/prəˈd(y)ʊsər/) a person responsible for the financial aspects of staging a play

**cir·cle** (ˈsɜr-kəl) an area of action or influence

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THE REVOLUTIONISTS, LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR, 2019 Next Actors

**HEAR YE! HEAR YE! THE GAUNTLET HAS BEEN THROWN!**

by Jane Flieller

The **Dorothy Inbusch Foundation** has made a very generous offer to Next Act Theatre! Make a donation and they will match it dollar-for-dollar up to \$10,000 for any new or increased gifts made through December 31, 2020.

In what will surely be a very challenging time for performing arts groups, Next Act is incredibly grateful for the generosity of the Inbusch Foundation and to you – our loyal supporters, for helping us secure a successful season.

This additional funding will go a long way toward the realization of our 2020-21 season as we navigate our way through an ever-changing landscape. Please consider a gift to Next Act Theatre today and double its impact!



You can watch our virtual production of *THE CHRISTIANS* on your phone, tablet, laptop, desktop computer or a number of other devices. For the most enjoyable viewing experience, however, why not create a full home theatre experience using your television?

There are a few ways to view *THE CHRISTIANS* from your TV at home:

## HDMI CONNECTION

The easiest way to view *THE CHRISTIANS* is to connect a laptop, phone or tablet to your TV through an HDMI cable. For this to work, your TV will need an HDMI port, located either on the side or back.



Depending on the device you're connecting, you will need to plug the other end of the cord into the device's HDMI port (often the case with a laptop)



or a charging port (often the case with a phone or tablet). They can look like this:



The type of device you're connecting will change the type of cable you need, so make sure you've got the right kind ready to connect!



Once you have the correct cable and you've connected your laptop, phone or tablet to your TV, it will either automatically begin sharing your screen or you will need to go into your TV's menu using your remote control to change the **source** or **input** to HDMI - this will correspond to the HDMI slot you've connected to on your TV. There may be more than one from which to choose.

Once you're connected, the sound should be coming out of your TV rather than your device. If not, check your device audio settings by selecting the arrow next to 'Mute' on the bottom right of the screen and either choose 'Same as system' or your TV speakers if that appears as an option under 'Select a speaker.'



## CASTING FROM ANOTHER DEVICE

The other way to get our show to your television is to stream or "cast" it from another device. This requires you to have an accessory like a Chromecast, Amazon Fire Stick, Roku or Apple TV attached to your TV.

When your phone, laptop or tablet is connected to the same Wi-Fi network as the accessories listed above, you should be able to find a "cast" option on your device. This is sometimes also called "Screen Mirroring," "Quick Connect," "Smart View" or other names. To find it, look in your **options** or **settings**. Once you've found it, turn it on to cast your device's screen to your TV accessory, and start the video!

Our website will also feature a video walkthrough and more in-depth explanations on perfecting your home theatre setup. For the best results, we suggest testing out your setup before the day you plan to watch the show and contacting us with any remaining questions!

Along with our virtual production of *THE CHRISTIANS*, we're very excited to announce a new program: Curbside Concessions! During the online run of the show, from November 23 - December 13, you'll be able to order some of your favorite snacks and drinks from the Next Act bar and pick them up at our building. It's the perfect way to complete your home theatre viewing experience.

Ordering Curbside Concessions is easy: all you have to do is **place an order on our website or call us at [414] 278-7780** to reserve your snacks and drinks and set your pickup time. Then, drive up to the front doors of Next Act Theatre at your reserved time

and we'll bring your treats out to you! Weekday reservations must be made by 5:00 PM the day before your pickup time. Weekend reservations must be made by 3:00 PM on Friday.

Additionally, if you order \$50 worth of snacks and drinks, we'll upgrade your order to include special, show-related keepsakes including a church fan, a CD of gospel music and more! These are special mementos that you can't get anywhere else and will help you get in the spirit to watch *THE CHRISTIANS*.

We are also offering a limited, non-alcoholic menu for delivery. Delivery orders can be placed online like pickup orders.

## Cocktails (w/choice of mixer) - \$7

- Rehorst Vodka (Great Lakes Distillery)
- Rehorst Gin (Great Lakes Distillery)
- Kinnickinnic Whiskey (Great Lakes Distillery)
- Spiced Rum
- Dewar's White Label Scotch

## Beer - \$5

- Spotted Cow
- Riverwest Stein
- Lakefront IPA
- Miller Lite

## Cookies - \$4

- Chocolate Chip
- Oatmeal Raisin
- Peanut Butter
- Gluten Free Flourless Chocolate (contains nuts)

## Wine by the Bottle - \$16

- Cabernet
- Merlot
- Pinot Noir
- Pinot Grigio
- Chardonnay

## Soda & Juice - \$2

- Coca-Cola
- Diet Coke
- 7Up
- Diet 7Up
- Root Beer
- Ginger Ale
- Squirt
- Lemon Sparkling Water
- Club Soda
- Tonic Water
- Orange Juice
- Cranberry Juice

## Wine (individual size) - \$6

- Riesling
- White Zinfandel

## Champagne

## (individual size) - \$4



**Innovation** is one hallmark of the human species; we are quite adaptable after all. Deborah and I were staying within the old walls of Florence in a comfortable B&B, and during an early trip to the washroom, I heard a sort of grinding noise kick in just as I flushed the toilet. Inquiring at the desk, we were told that the noisy device was a shredder, designed to shred the paper and waste before the ugly mess hits the sewers. It turns out that the ancient sewers of Florence were in constant danger of getting clogged. I thought, how ingenious. The sewage treatment process begins at the source rather than upon its central location arrival. Maybe something Milwaukee's Sewerage District could use?

**A PASSING PHASE**

I had never driven a car in Europe on any previous visit so I was looking forward to heading out onto the Italian byways in our snazzy Opel rent-a-car. We had booked a week's stay in the country which would serve as our base for local shopping, good cooking and day trips. While tooling along a very nice stretch of two-lane highway, I was taught a new technique in the art of passing. Approaching us was one car going about the speed limit, followed closely by a second, impatient to pass. Naturally, I expected the second driver to wait for a clear opening on our side of the road. Instead, he smoothly slid out into the middle, straddling the center line, while at the same time, the car he was passing slid over a half-lane toward the shoulder. I quickly realized it was my turn to do the same on our side, thus creating a miraculous, new center lane where there had been none just three seconds before. Speedy Giuseppe gunned his Lamborghini and disappeared quickly in our rearview mirror. Now, that's collaboration!



**ROUND AND ROUND**

Returning to Florence from our car trip, we hit horrible traffic on a Saturday evening. It was backed up for miles, well outside the city's old walls and our final destination, the rental car garage. After a good hour of creeping along, we were getting close to Avis Italia, when we found ourselves in a massive traffic circle in front of the train station. As imagined on a clock face, we came into the circle at 12 o'clock, driving counter clockwise, needing to get to 2 o'clock where our side street turned off. The circle was clogged bumper-to-bumper, six lanes across, with cars, service trucks, taxis, tour buses and, always, the weaving vespas and incessant horns. Our progress was excruciatingly slow, literally by inches and constantly challenged by the slow-motion aggression of undeterred Florentines behind wheels. We were at last within feet of our turn, when a female Italian cop blew her whistle and was waving us away from the side street. It looked like we were about to be sent for another rock around the clock. I couldn't hold it in any more. I leaned out the window, and using the hand gestures of my ancestors

*Continued, next page*

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**Mohammad ElBsat** hails from Saida, Lebanon. He arrived in Milwaukee in 2006 to study at Marquette University where he earned a Masters in the field of electrical engineering. He now works for Johnson Controls, applying advanced algorithms for energy cost and occupant comfort optimization.



Mohammad went on to earn a PhD at Marquette, during which time he discovered their theatre department. He landed a role in THE CHERRY ORCHARD and then went on to perform the title role in THE BIG FRIENDLY GIANT. From Marquette, he went on to work for other theatre companies such as Windfall Theatre, Milwaukee Entertainment Group and the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre.

A friend recommended Mohammad to Next Act Theatre's Producing Artistic Director, David Ceccarini, for consideration of the role of Asfoor in BACK OF THE THROAT (2015-16). He considers it one of the best experiences in the theatre he's ever had. "The quality of the production, the professionalism of the cast and crew, and the family-like atmosphere all contributed to making that experience great. I was curious as to what it took to serve on the board. I expressed interest to the Development Director, she put me in touch with [Next Act's Board President] Dave Anderson and I was on from that point forward."

Mohammad feels the most rewarding aspect to serving on [Next Act's] Board is "knowing that you are helping a theatre company maintain its ground and prosper. As we all know, live theatre faces many challenges, so to have the opportunity to help the theatre overcome its challenges and continue its mission of community engagement while raising societal issues, is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

*TUSCANY, continued*

and impassioned, loud and very-broken Italian, I argued our case. While Deborah was certain we'd be arrested, I think the lady cop thought it best to let this ill-spoken American go on his way for fear of creating a needless, international incident of language butchery. Heading for home, there was one more impediment: an enormous tour bus was nearly blocking the tiny street, with Avis not far beyond. By that time, I had fully adapted to the chaos around us and gently but firmly eased past

In true Board of Director fashion, Mohammad leaves us with one final thought: "Live theatre needs support now more than ever. With the pandemic at hand, theatre is one of the most affected industries. Being on the board, I know what it takes to keep theatres afloat. Consider making a donation to Next Act and other theatres in Milwaukee to help keep the theatre community alive."

**Haly Besaw** is a new addition to Next Act Theatre's Board of Directors, having arrived just prior to the onset of the pandemic. Haly is originally from Oneida, Wisconsin, and she went to high school in Green Bay. She attended MSOE in Milwaukee, graduating with a BS in Electrical Engineering. Haly and her husband, Mike, spent ten "glorious" years in California, but ultimately returned to her roots in Wisconsin. She currently works at Baird Wealth Management as a Financial Advisor.



While not an actor herself, Haly loves attending live theatre and enjoyed watching her kids perform over the years. Her creative energies are now spent playing the flute in the Lakeshore Symphonic

Band and spending a lot of time outside in her garden.

Haly was referred to Next Act by former NAT Board member and Baird colleague, Beth Kavelaris. Haly's reaction to serving on the board was one of excitement to be involved in "such a wonderful organization. I'm looking forward to building a great relationship with all of the Board members. I look forward to engaging in creative ways to help Next Act through this pandemic."

In her spare time, Haly enjoys participating in triathlons, swimming and hiking. She is a self-professed "cat lady".

the bus with our right wheels up on the sidewalk. Good thing no one needed their luggage just then. Exchanging the trusty Opel's four wheels for our four strong legs was one of the most satisfying and relief-bringing events of that long day.

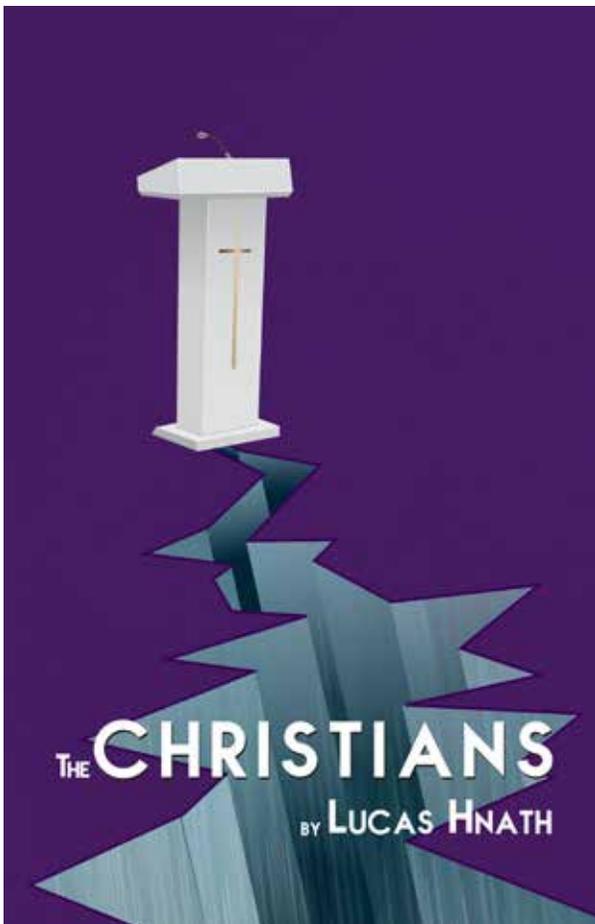
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