

## Why 9 CIRCLES?

by David Ceccarini

**They say this COVID year** has crept along, seeming more like a decade. But then again, I find my eldest daughter will turn 18 this month and, come September, will go off to some midwest university soon to be named. I gotta say: wow, that was fast! I guess “they” told me it was going to happen this way. Time is a funny, stretchy sort of thing.

Our upcoming play takes me back to the first days of April, 2003, when my beautiful, brilliant wife Deborah and I were anticipating the birth of that first child. Feeling her contractions coming stronger and more frequently, we checked into the Aurora birthing facility near UWM on Sunday night around 10PM. Quite the lovely place. However, it seemed Miranda Ryan Ceccarini was somewhat reluctant to make her debut, as she didn't emerge until the wee hours of Tuesday morning. Yeah, that was long, no matter who's keeping the clock.

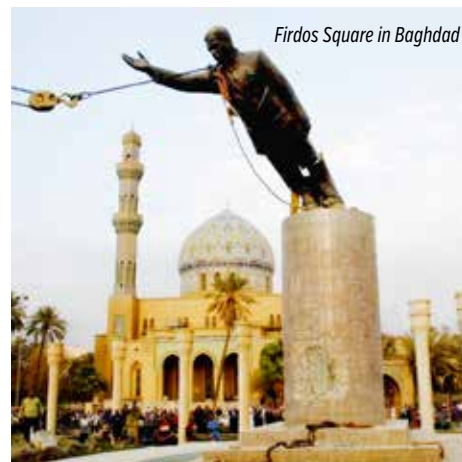
It was April 8; Deborah was understandably exhausted from her heroic ordeal, yet filtering through the fatigue was exhilaration and amazement at the new life we held in our arms.

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 Iraqis: 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.



Firdos Square in Baghdad

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).

But as new mom Deborah and I brought our bundled baby home and began every parent's crash course in infant care, the democra-seeds scattered between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were proving to be a messy, 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.

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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 at the beginning, and more importantly, recall the scene in which 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 speaking of angles, this play has transferred very nicely to video format.) When I picked up Bill's play to read for the first time, it remained clutched in my hand until the last page was turned. I hope it has the power to grab you, too. See you at the virtual theatre.

## Bravo (and Brava) to You!

by Jane Flieller

**Saturday, March 13, 2021** marked Next Act Theatre's first virtual fundraising event: Bravo, Next Act 2021. While things went relatively smoothly [a bit of a false start until our connectivity improved made for a heart-stopping few minutes], we very much look forward to an in-person event next spring!

A big shout out and thank you to our wonderful emcee, Doug Jarecki; performers Bree Beelow, David Ceasarini, Marcee Doherty-Elst and Adam Qutaishat; Mohammad ElBsat and Rick Pendzich for the hilarious video, *Mrs. Krinklerapper Goes To Next Act*; technical support: Mike Van Dreser and Creativeland; the Next Act Theatre staff; our Board of Directors; and, my fantastic Bravo Committee: Terri Alioto, Libby Amato, Cathy Jakicic, Annie Jurczyk and A.J. Magoon. We are also very grateful to our Bravo Sponsors: CliftonLarsonAllen/Mike Burzynski, Lois Ceasarini, Annie Jurczyk Realtor, and Judy Keyes, who offered the \$5,000 match for support of our new internship program. There are many moving parts to any event; virtual being no exception - so, many thanks to all who helped put it together and get it on the air!

But of course, there'd be no event if nobody came! So the biggest thank you goes to you: our patrons.

From ordering meals from our Restaurant Partners [Amilinda, Bunzel's and Firefly Tosa] and picking up cocktail pails from Next Act before the event, to navigating your way through registration, on-line auctions and entertainment, we have **you** to account for the event more than **doubling** its goal! So, give yourself a round of applause!!

From every auction item or wine pull purchased to donations toward our newly created Inclusion, Equality and Opportunity Internship Program, we did what we set out to do. We raised funds to produce four exciting productions next season, provide a performing home for other local companies such as Renaissance Theaterworks and offer tuition-free arts education programming for teens. Bravo and brava to all of you!



Bravo Emcee Doug Jarecki

**We hope you enjoyed Bravo, Next Act 2021**, from the pre-event Happy Hour - a Q & A with Next Act favorites David Ceasarini, Michael Cotey Marti Gobel and Malkia Stampley - through the musical entertainment and Jarecki's lively auctioneering, and finally, to the Last Call package. The list below recognizes those who generously donated goods and services to our auctions. It's a particularly difficult time for many and we can't thank everyone enough for their support. Be sure to check out these businesses and help them the way they helped us!

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Marcee Doherty-Elst singing "Worst Pies in London" from SWEENEY TODD

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Wisconsin Club  
Wisconsin State Fair  
Your Millennial Granny  
[Caroline Norton]  
Veronica Zahn & Matt Norby  
ZaRoni's Pizza



Bree Beelow singing "What Baking Can Do" from WAITRESS

Discovery World Milwaukee  
EAA Aviation Museum  
Embodied Heart Healing Arts  
Karen Estrada Massage Therapy



David Ceasarini singing Alan Sherman's "Hungarian Goulash"

## Mark Ard is a natural-born storyteller.

He's a big, boisterous man with a ready smile and an internal engine running constantly, just above idle. When asked a question, his response can be quick, sure and full-throated, cuss words and all. Or, he'll silently run through his brain's file cabinet of experiences, searching for the right tale to tell. The narrative pours forth – descriptive, detailed, honest, impassioned and exactly on point. How lucky we were to meet Mark last year in preparation for our work on *9 CIRCLES*.

To help us delve more deeply into the play, we had reached out to a unique, local arts organization called Feast of Crispian\* (FoC). Its mission is dedicated to working with veterans of military service, with particular emphasis on PTSD issues and re-integration. FoC continues to be an indispensable community partner, helping us understand circumstances and issues in Bill Cain's play from a veteran's perspective. Mark Ard is the Development Director for FoC and also a Marine veteran.

One year later, in Zoom mode, *9 CIRCLES* director and cast sat down with Mark to hear his thoughts on the play. First, we asked about his background.

"I didn't have enough years in to make Staff Sergeant. But being a Sergeant of Marines was the best job of my life."

Mark was in the Marines for eight years, with overseas deployment in Fallujah, Iraq in 2004, during Operation Phantom Fury. He moved up quickly through the enlisted ranks to become Sergeant, a hands-on leader, mentor, disciplinarian, teacher and counselor of his squad of about a dozen soldiers.

So what does he think of the play?

"I'm so glad you guys are getting back to this one. It brings up a conversation we just don't have. It asks the tough question, 'Why are we fighting?' The way most people deal with veterans is to say 'Thank



Marine Sgt. Mark Ard (center, standing) with his squad

you for your service' or slap a yellow ribbon on the bumper and then move on with their busy lives. But if more Americans really knew *WTF* was going on [in war], they'd be more inclined to ask questions and challenge the rosy pictures the military and the media put out."

In our play, a young man of questionable suitability as a soldier is recruited to serve in the Army because the recruiter had a quota to meet. I asked Mark about our all-volunteer armed forces, a system that was instituted in 1973 at the tail end of the Vietnam War.

"I believe it was a Greek general and philosopher, Thucydides, who said, 'A society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.' That's nothing against warriors or scholars. I just think that if a larger cross-section of citizens were involved in the military, it might bring pressure to bear on decision-makers to make them more accountable."

At one point, the troubled soldier in *9 CIRCLES* seeks help from an Army psychiatrist. How is that viewed in the military?

"You just don't do it. There's a culture of hyper-masculinity throughout the military. I mean, here's a bunch of young guys, all hyped up from basic training indoctrination, dressed up like f\*\*\*ing Rambo in Kevlar and carbines, running around in Hummers and armored personnel carriers topped with machine guns. You believe you're indestructible. Asking for help blows your cover in the eyes of your squadmates – and for you, too. Even though privately you might be feeling the need to reach out, it's a line in the sand that few soldiers cross."

Are there consequences to that sort of cultural mindset?

"Oh, yeah, for sure, and that's sort of the whole point of FoC. Even in the best circumstances, soldiers who come home from a battle zone have a tough time relating to friends and family. You're really different from when you left, both psychologically and physiologically. You've been in this hyper-vigilant, testosterone pumping survival mode for months and it's hard to come down from that. It's hard to share thoughts and feelings; it's hard to trust those who haven't seen what you've seen, done what you've done. And sometimes the effects of trauma go much deeper which can cause veterans to turn to self-abuse, substance abuse or other destructive behaviors in their attempts to cope."

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*(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. Thank you, Mr. Cain. –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 a future president pardons criminals who (witnesses say) did the same, and that 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.

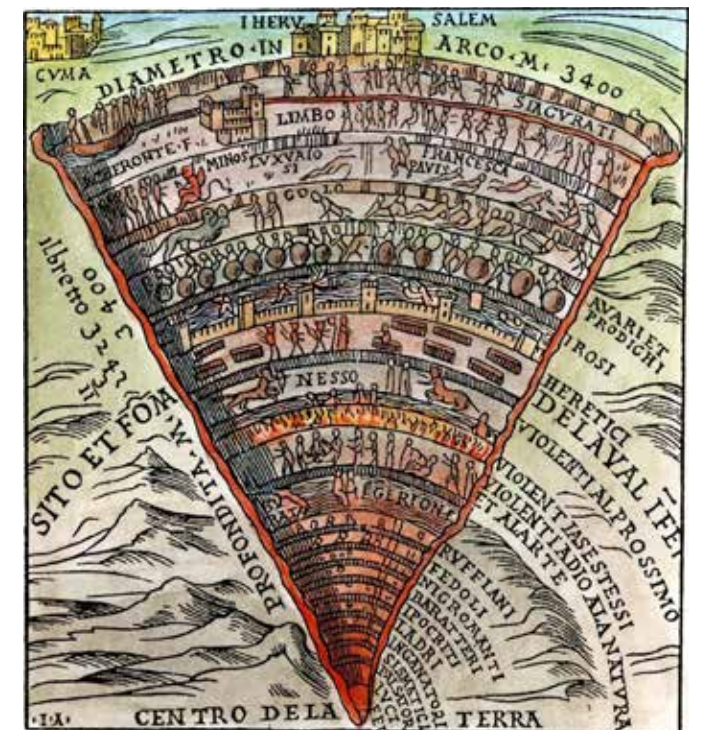
May the soldier and his victims and the country – both countries – find their way to the journey's end.

456.

Close enough.

Years after writing *9 CIRCLES* – still trying to understand –

Bill Cain



**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 first watched all of the “making-of” special features. 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 our 9 CIRCLES pre-show workshops is the same: it is my goal to offer our students a way to self-regulate, to make the conscious choice to turn on their critically-thinking brains when their empathetic imaginations start to overwhelm them. A simple grounding technique that reminds you to

breathe and say “I’m safe here, I’m only watching a play” can be a useful skill to have in your pocket when your nervous system is telling you to run away from challenging feelings.

Casey Hoekstra and I were actors together during *BLOOD AT THE ROOT* (Next Act 2019). I was delighted with his exuberance in the classroom during workshops. Once he was cast in 9 CIRCLES, 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 younger audiences, they can focus on Casey the actor – that guy they met in the workshop – rather than on his Daniel Reeves character in the play.

9 CIRCLES was emotionally tough for me, just to read it, and I’m an adult [some people say]. 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. The challenge is worth it – it is an intense and beautiful play.

*Grace DeWolff is Next Act’s Education Director, having established the new position in 2019. Grace heads NAT’s education outreach efforts, which include school workshops, study guides and an annual student project. She is also the Director of NAT’s flagship student program, The Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens.*

Some patrons may have the good fortune to have known Gordana and Milan Racic who were stalwart Next Act supporters for more than 15 years. Gordana served on the Next Act Board, and with Milan sponsored many NAT productions and the Next Actors teen program over the years. The two of them were rarely separated. At Board meetings, Milan would read quietly in a corner while we conducted business. And then afterward, he would either tease me with some twinkling conceit or tell me about the book he was reading: almost always historical biography. Milan would also take pleasure in mischievous heckling from his front row, Section 2 seat as I began the pre-show speech.

Sadly, Gordana passed away somewhat suddenly, three years ago this May. It was a very difficult time for Milan, without his life’s companion of 61 years. He struggled to maintain purpose without her and found some solace in their longtime relationship with the Milwaukee County Zoo. His favorite project was bringing a second snow leopard to be a mate to the one already in residence. It took a good while for the cats’ relationship to develop, but Milan finally got his wish fulfilled last May as a snow leopard kitten was born.

After nearly three years of solitary existence, Milan slipped away in February. I can only believe that his passing finally brought him the relief he had been seeking since losing his dearest friend.

The two of them were extraordinary people, each in their own right and also as a team. They both started life in Yugoslavia, met and married there, and while under communist rule, plotted their escape from behind the Iron Curtain. They were patient;



first Milan hiked over the mountains to Austria with some companions and then made his way to the States. About a year later, Gordana [under the guise of going to retrieve her errant husband] arrived in the US, was re-united with Milan, and never looked back.

Their legacy of Next Act patronage has continued all these years with gifts in support of the hearing loop system, annual sponsorships and a very generous bequest. We share sadness with friends and family for their loss, and remain most grateful for their dedication to many philanthropic causes, including Next Act.

Rest in partnership; rest in peace, Gordana and Milan.

OUR PRODUCTION PARTNER, continued

What’s the connection between FoC and theatre, particularly Shakespeare?

“Oh man, we performed FoC’s original play, *AND COMES SAFE HOME*, two years ago at the country’s first National Veterans Theater Festival here in Milwaukee. The play combines our stories with Shakespearean pieces, which amplifies our experiences and brings our audience closer to them. Through the process, our trauma is shared and our feelings validated, but we’ve still got the Shakespeare “filter” to help keep us emotionally safe. I had never felt anything like that feeling of love and support when the audience gave us a rousing standing ovation at the end. I’m a real believer in the power of theatre. I can’t wait to see what you guys do with 9 CIRCLES.”

Given Mark’s penchant for storytelling, it seemed only a matter of time before he ended up in the theatre. We thank Mark for advancing the important work of FoC, and we greatly appreciate his enthusiasm for and interest in our 9 CIRCLES project.



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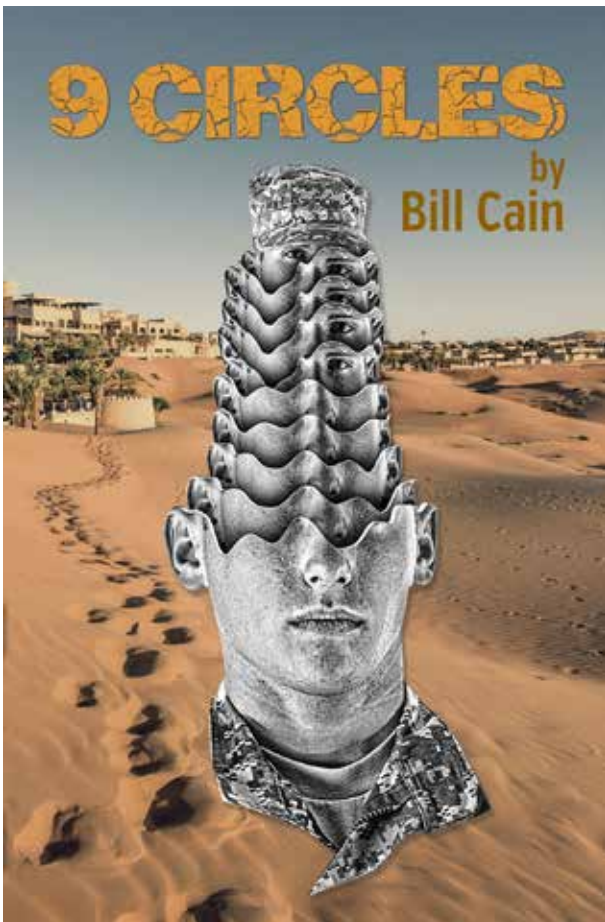
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## 9 CIRCLES by Bill Cain

A Next Act video presentation

Honorably discharged but later accused of a war crime in Iraq, American soldier Daniel Reeves must navigate an onslaught of commanding officers, public defenders, lawyers, preachers and psychiatrists who seek answers, excuses or culpability. Playwright Bill Cain shines his interrogating spotlight on the psychological drama of warfare, and the price we ask our young soldiers to forfeit in pursuit of honorable victory.

*This play contains strong language and brief suggested nudity.*

**Directed by:** Michael Cotey

**Featuring:** Casey Hoeskra as Private Reeves  
with David Ceasarini, Chike Johnson  
& Malkia Stampley

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