

MISSION: Next Act engages the hearts and minds of its audiences with compelling and intimate theatre productions intended to stimulate thought, foster the exchange of ideas and to promote the development of new perspectives and understanding.

HISTORY: Next Act Theatre is a professional nonprofit arts organization located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Next Act was created in 1990 with the merger of Next Generation Theatre and Theatre Tesseract. The company was originally led by Artistic Director Jonathan Smoots and Associate Artistic Director David Cecsarini. Just prior to the company's third season, Cecsarini took the reins as Next Act's Artistic Director, and Smoots stayed on for three years as Artistic Associate. Around the same time, Charles Kakuk came aboard as Managing Director, a position he held until his death in 2014.

Next Act performed in a number of venues in its early years including Centennial Hall (located in the Milwaukee Public Library), the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre's Stiemke Theatre, the Todd Wehr Theatre in the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, the Broadway Theatre Center's Studio Theatre, the Humphrey Masonic Center and Marquette's Helfaer Theatre. Seeing a need to establish a home space that could accommodate a growing number of patrons, Next Act created the Off-Broadway Theatre in 2000. This 99-seat theatre space at 342 N. Water Street, also housed their offices and rehearsal space. Next Act would remain there until the sale of the building prompted an ambitious and successful capital campaign that resulted in a 152-seat theatre in the burgeoning Harbor District, just south of the Third Ward, along the Milwaukee River. The new facility opened in fall 2011 and after only four seasons, all construction debt was retired.

Next Act Theatre offers a four-production season of provocative and compelling plays. In addition to its regular programming and educational activities, Next Act often rents its space to small, emerging and touring organizations. In spring 2021, Next Act welcomed Renaissance Theaterworks with their production of *Best of Br!nk Br!efs*. Renaissance Theaterworks will make the Next Act venue their artistic home moving forward. Each year, guests enjoy four visual arts exhibits, which feature the work of local artists, in the theatre lobby.

SEASON PROGRAMMING

Next Act Theatre believes that stories work best when they involve characters in the midst of a struggle or a quest. Audiences identify with them, becoming emotionally and intellectually invested. The character's situation, tragedy or triumph becomes the audiences' to endure, mourn or celebrate. The theatre proves itself, then, as essential to the nourishment of our human spirit by bringing us together to examine, experience and explore the human condition through the plays we present and perhaps come away with knowledge and perspective that only a good story can provide.

2021-21, Next Act Theatre's 31st season, was a challenging one due to COVID-19. However, artists, members of the Board of Directors, staff, volunteers and patrons rose to the occasion as the company navigated its way through the pandemic with grace and fortitude. Generous donors assisted in keeping Next Act financially intact.

Beginning in March 2020, when COVID closed the doors of arts organizations around the world, most Next Act patrons generously donated the value of their tickets to the final show of the 2019-2020 season, *9 Circles* (shut down after one week of rehearsals) and to the annual spring fundraiser, *Bravo, Next Act* (also cancelled). Along with relief grants, individual and foundation gifts and judicious spending, Next Act made it through the season without any layoffs or job eliminations.



As it quickly became evident that live theatre would not be an option for the season, Next Act hired a local professional filmmaker to videotape all four productions and adapted educational initiatives to virtual options. Two of the originally scheduled productions, *Red Herring* and *The Last White Man*, were moved to the 2021-22 season. *Red Herring*, a physical comedy with six actors, did not make a good fit for transference to video and *The Last White Man* is a world premiere and as such, NAT chose to move it to a season in which patrons could see it live, giving the play the theatrical welcome it deserves. Two original shows remained: *The Christians* (filmed with safety protocols in place at an off-site location in fall 2020) and *Principal Principle*, which was fully-produced as a live production in the theatre, but filmed and distributed virtually rather than attended live.

The director of *Principal Principle* put together two online seminars for the Wisconsin Regional Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in which participants viewed selected 30-minute excerpts from the play on YouTube and then held a discussion with the playwright and director via Zoom.

Red Herring and *The Last White Man* were replaced by *9 Circles* (the production that was halted when the pandemic began) and *Natural Shocks*. It was determined that *9 Circles* would work well in video format, which it did. *Natural Shocks* came to Next Act's attention by way of Michael Cotey (Director, *Equivocation* and *9 Circles*). He had directed this one-woman play from Chicago via Zoom, while the actor filmed herself on location in the basement of her parents' home in Brookfield. The result was a stunning production about domestic abuse and gun violence. The piece was met with enthusiasm by the author, nationally-renowned Lauren Gunderson, an award-winning playwright.

Mr. Cotey collaborated with Third Avenue Playhouse (TAP) in Sturgeon Bay, who presented the video to their patrons. Upon seeing it, Producing Artistic Director David Cecsarini chose to present the completed piece to Next Act's patrons as the fourth and final production of the 2020-21 season, compensating all involved for their contributions to the show.

All four productions received outstanding critical reviews and positive feedback from patrons. As difficult as going virtual for a year was, it did make it possible for people outside the area, such as retirees, patrons who had moved away and the families and friends of cast members who live out-of-town, to see a Next Act show.



Photo by Timothy Moder

"We truly enjoyed The Christians and used it as an illustration in this morning's adult theology class. It was great." – Patron, The Christians

"...we were thinking we could be friends with this brave band of English teacher heroes, identifying with their mission until ultimately, we had to take sides with the characters – and that wasn't easy!" – Patron, Principal Principle



Photo by Timothy Moder





Photo by Timothy Moder

"I'm wiped out from viewing [9 Circles] but need to say that it HAS to be seen. It is about so much but most importantly about what it is to be human and the complicated nature of war. It's about what it does to humans on both sides of the conflict and what our country asks of our young men." – Patron, 9 Circles

"One woman. One camera. One story. Cotey and Voster's Natural Shocks isn't merely a good substitution for live theatre – it's one of the most unflinchingly intimate pieces of drama to be committed to video all year." – Shepherd Express



Photo by Jennifer Vosters

Three talkbacks were held for each production, via Zoom, the majority of which were very well-attended. One of the talkbacks for *Natural Shocks* took place with the following Community Partners attending, having watched the video of the production:

- Carla Washington, VP of Programs and Chief Partnership Officer at Sojourner Truth House
- Heidi Rose, Program Director at WAVE Education Fund (Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort)
- Reverend Kerri Parker, Executive Director at Wisconsin Council of Churches

These professionals shared their expertise in the areas explored in *Natural Shocks*, providing an even deeper layer to an important conversation about domestic violence and gun control.

An unexpected benefit to moving talkbacks to a Zoom format was the time between patrons' viewing of a production and the talkback, normally held in-person immediately following the show. Zoom talks, held once a week for the three week "run," allowed audiences more time to absorb the material and the actors who joined in the conversations from home were rested and alert, having not just finished a performance. Another positive with Zoom talkbacks was allowing out-of-town directors and/or authors to join the discussion – not normally an option. The talkbacks, typically about 20 minutes in length in-person, lasted no less than an hour on Zoom and inspired strong reactions and deep dialogue.

"Our Zoom conversation saw us questioning our own racism and asking ourselves how we would have acted (or not acted) in the same situation. We saw the terrible binds that some school systems put their teachers into and how the teachers will try to be free and relevant in those systems. We saw race, politics, inexperience/experience, bureaucracy, loyalty – all exposed and blended and raw." – Patron, Principal Principle

Due to their popularity, Next Act will offer one Zoom talkback per production in a newly-created Sunday Night Insights series.



The Christians by Lucas Hnath ran virtually from November 23 – December 13, 2020. Sponsored by Steve and Nancy Einhorn and Angela Jacobi. Featuring David Cecsarini, Marti Gobel, Rick Richter, Andrew Muwonge and Emily Vitrano. Directed by Edward Morgan.

Principal Principle by Joe Zarrow ran virtually from February 15 – March 7, 2021. Sponsored by David Paris Dentistry, John Mahony and Evelyn Burdick, and Jan Serr and John Shannon. The Bader Foundation generously sponsored the show's accompanying Student Outreach Project. Featuring Flora Coker, Megan Kim, Malaina Moore, April Paul, Malkia Stampley and Ericka Wade. Directed by Marti Gobel.

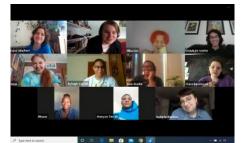
9 Circles by Bill Cain ran virtually from April 26 – May 16, 2021. Sponsored by Donna Martynski, Jan Serr and John Shannon. Featuring David Cecsarini, Casey Hoekstra, Chike Johnson and Malkia Stampley. Directed by Michael Cotey.

Natural Shocks by Lauren Gunderson ran virtually from May 24 – June 13, 2021. Originally filmed by Jennifer Vosters and directed by Michael Cotey. Featuring Jennifer Vosters.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Beginning with the Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens program (NASTT - July 2020), the pandemic affected all educational programming throughout the 2020-21 season. Recruiting workshops for NASTT could not be held in spring 2020 as schools had already shut down. Next Act's Educational Manager, Grace DeWolff, reached out to alumni of the program inviting them to be part of a virtual adaptation of NASTT. Eleven students from eight different schools participated in the program. Students gathered via Zoom to play theater games, create a story, write a play, rehearse and perform it. Students also gathered once a week for lunch and social time. They were asked to keep writing journals and exercise logs – as much as possible, activities were retained from in-person classes.

NASTT's 2020 final product was a one-act play called "Is This A Game?" that reflected the students' feelings of isolation and fear as a result of COVID-19. It ran on YouTube for several days in August where family, friends, patrons and donors could see the result of the summer program in lieu of our regular one-week tour to community and senior centers and final live performance.



Screenshot courtesy of Grace DeWolff

"I'm glad to be doing Next Act this year. I will admit that I am a bit stressed. Next Act is actually keeping me distracted from the stress, which I love. I don't know what I would have done without the Next Act program ... [it] has been amazing." – Ryleigh, Ronald Reagan High School



Feedback from students like Ryleigh reinforce the importance of the program. From learning life skills such as team work, public speaking and the development of writing skills to discovering friendships with peers outside their usual academic and social networks, NASTT goes beyond the traditional theater arts class, encouraging teenagers to dig deep to come up with meaningful conversations between themselves and their audience.

Following Next Actors, DeWolff moved forward with other educational initiatives, spending a significant amount of time adapting programs to virtual formats, tracking down teachers and students to disseminate information and holding online workshops.

NAT's education initiatives also include:

Student matinees and accompanying workshops: NAT provided links to all of its productions in the season to local high schools at no cost. Nearly twice as many students viewed the videos than would have attended a live performance because scheduling and transportation were not an issue. Over 400 students viewed *Principal Principle* and one school requested and received a post-viewing virtual workshop with an actor from *9 Circles*.

Community Project: Next Act's community project in 2020 corresponded with *Principal Principle*. The premise of the project was to echo the play's theme by having teachers and students switch positions, the latter held responsible for creating a syllabus. Twenty-three students took part, creating lesson plans based on the "Manageable, Measurable and Meaningful" template. Discussions were held to talk about what makes a "good" teacher; student expectations of what constitutes "good lessons;" and what learning objectives could be without any obstacles in the way. Students came away with a deeper appreciation and understanding for what teachers face when planning their curriculum. The project allowed the students a unique perspective into the true and complicated nature of teaching.

Talkback Series: Next Act coordinates a series of five or more post-show talkbacks in conjunction with each season production, as well as after readings and special presentations. Directors and actors host many of the informal discussions, with occasional assistance from professionals who possess expertise on the play's issues. As mentioned earlier, talkbacks moved to a virtual format in the 2020-21 season.

Newsletters: Next Act publishes five newsletters a season, providing in-depth information about upcoming plays, giving attendees the opportunity to learn more about the play and gain a deeper understanding of the content, history and issues derived from the production. Other items in the newsletter provide additional information to our patrons (upcoming events, sponsor and donor recognition, updates on our educational initiatives, etc).

Shakespeare-In-Schools: DeWolff adapted her workshops into a series of videos and made them available at no cost to schools. Thanks to technology and the internet, the series even found its way to the College of Marin in California. DeWolff was asked to lead a virtual seminar based on these videos. Local high school students and teachers were impressed with the quality and content of the videos: *"They are the perfect length. You can watch two during class with room for discussion and questions." – High School Teacher*

Community Partnerships: Next Act reaches into the community on a regular basis to identify and connect with other nonprofit agencies whose mission reflects a particular show's theme. Next Act and the participating organization cross-promote, resulting in Next Act patrons learning more about a partnering group's mission while attracting new visitors to the theatre from the partner group. When appropriate, a member of the partnering organization may provide a speaker to join Next Act for a Personal Preview or Talkback session. Next Act sometimes provides speakers or brief performances at the partnering organization's venue.



Personal Previews: Next Act holds a series of talks before performances, intended to enrich the audience's viewing experience. Free of charge and open to the public, these presentations give context to the play with insights on topics such as artistic production, design challenges and historical background. Due to the virtual format of the 2020-21 season, these talks were suspended, but will return for the 2021-22 season.

The success of this past year was found in NAT's ability to create a viable season for its patrons and provide educational programming, always at no cost to schools or students (with the exception of greatly reduced tickets to student matinees), regardless of the significant obstacles posed by the pandemic. The season was made possible through the generosity, patience and understanding of NAT's wonderful patrons, donors, schools and students.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

In the wake of the tragic murder of George Floyd and the world's response, NAT heard an important conversation begin which prompted the exploration of what we as an organization could do to inform ourselves about the racial inequality that has plagued this country for so long. While confident that voices from diverse communities are heard in many of the plays we do, we realized that we needed to develop opportunities to expand diversity within our technical and administrative staff. Open and honest conversations with members of the BIPOC community over this past year helped identify short-comings in our organization and as a result of their suggestions, NAT initiated the following:

The Inclusion, Equality and Opportunity Paid Internship Program: Emerging artists of color take on an internship in the areas of directing, stage management, design or administration. Interns have the opportunity to work in a professional environment, learning from those with expertise in each field. The goal of the program is to help nurture the careers of these young artists, helping to create networks and encouraging them to keep Milwaukee their home base.

"Being able to know what you want, don't want, what works, doesn't work, fits in every aspect of life. It doesn't matter if I am directing a show or creating a web series of some sort. The skills obtained from this experience will help with whatever life throws at me." – Directing Intern, Principal Principle

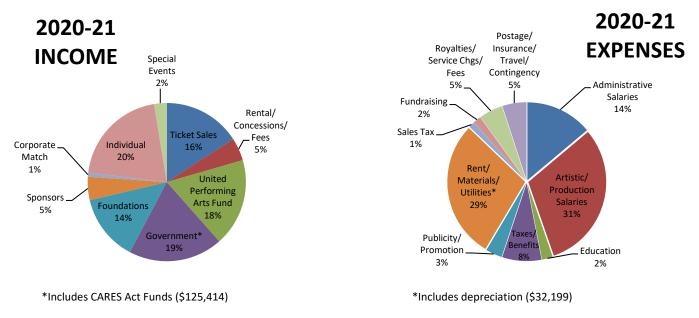
Community Liaison: This part-time position was also added to the NAT staff in the 2020-21 season. This individual assists in identifying and nurturing opportunities to connect in a meaningful way with communities unfamiliar with NAT's work and to encourage additional student participation from underrepresented schools in our arts education initiatives. When staff positions open, this person will assist in the recruitment of qualified candidates from a broader, more inclusive body of applicants.



FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

In the 2020-21 season, single ticket revenue goals were decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to virtual theatre. The first two plays of the season exceeded these reduced goals, while the second two plays did not meet them and overall single ticket sales were lower than in past seasons. There were no group sales, as groups were unable to gather in-person. Season ticket sales decreased compared to the 2019-2020 season, though subscription donations exceeded the previous season's total. Rentals in the 2020-2021 season were filming projects and in late spring 2021, Renaissance Theaterworks held a successful masked, limited capacity production of *Best of Br!nk Br!efs*.

Press and audience reviews were largely positive throughout the 2020-21 season. In addition to adminstrative staff, 36 artists: actors, directors, designers, stage managers, crew, board operators, dialect coaches and musicians, were engaged in paid positions to produce a successful virtual season.



Earned Income: Next Act earned 23% of its 2020-21 operating budget from ticket sales, special events, service fees, space rental, concession sales, equipment rental and interest. Total earned income for 2020-21 was \$187,787.

Contributed Income: Next Act derives contributed income (77% in 2020-21) from a variety of foundations, corporations, government agencies and individuals. During the past year, due to COVID, Next Act also received federal and state assistance (ie. CARES Act, PPP Loans, Milwaukee Arts Board, Herzfeld Foundation). Total contributed income for 2020-21 was \$625,002.

Expenses: Administrative and production expenses totaled \$706,792 in the 2020-21 season.

Fiscal Responsibility: Next Act maintains steady control of its annual budget, providing for necessary growth or reductions from year-to-year. The theater finished the 2020-2021 season with a **\$105,997** surplus.



Donors

As a 501(c)3 nonprofit arts organization, Next Act Theatre relies on the generosity of hundreds of supporters each year whose contributions allow us to create exciting live theatre, offer free arts education programming and provide employment for artists, arts administrators and artist-educators. The following are supporters of our 2020-21 season in the amount of \$1,000+:

James and Terri Alioto David and Patricia Anderson Anonymous (3) **Bader Philanthropies Bob Balderson** Donna and Donald Baumgartner Marcia Brooks and Edward Hammond Michael and Ericka Burzynski CAMPAC (County Funding) Miles and Barbara Capron Lois Cecsarini Judges John and Jean DiMotto The Einhorn Family Foundation Four Four Foundation Jane M. Foster Pam Frautschi Tim and Sue Frautschi William N. and Janice V. Godfrey Family **Foundation Trust** Judith Goetz Greater Milwaukee Foundation: **Colton Charitable Fund** Judith A. Keyes Family Fund Robert Gardenier and Lori Morse Charitable Fund Ildy and Skip Poliner Fund

Jami and Joe Hanreddy **Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation** Andrew and Paula Holman **Richard and Esther Huiting** Dorothy Inbusch Foundation, Inc. Johnson Controls Foundation Annie Jurczyk Mark and Ginny Kannenberg Werner and Susan Krause Pam Kriger Donor Advised Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation Mary Ann and Charles LaBahn Sandy Laedtke Sheldon and Marianne Lubar John Mahony and Evelyn Burdick The Martin Family Foundation Vincent L. Martin and Janet Dowler Martin Revocable Trust of 1993 Donna Martynski Guy and Mary Jo McDonald Kathleen McElroy and David Newby Joyce Mielke Milwaukee Arts Board Dwight and Marleen Morgan Daniel P. and Julie Murray Nonprofit Management Fund Kathy Nusslock

David Paris Dentistry Clare M. Peters Charitable Trust J. Michael Reavis Jack and Lucy Rosenberg Donor Advised Fund Mary Ruffolo and Ben Litwin Howard and Sue Schoenfeld Sempercor Foundation Jan Serr and John Shannon Foundation Sandra M. Seymour John and Pamela Shefchik The Shubert Foundation Dr. Mark and Nancy Smuckler Gilbert Southwell III and Tracy Luber Bert L. and Patricia S. Steigleder **Charitable Trust Eileen and George Stone** Tom and Linda Streifender Christine Symchych and Jim McNulty Way and Jacquelyn Thompson Jr. Julia and David Uihlein **United Performing Arts Fund** UPAF Bright Minds/Kasey's Fund Wisconsin Arts Board Wisconsin Arts Board - From the Cares Act Sandra Zingler and Barbara Johnson

PLANNED GIVING

Next Act Theatre is proud to announce our newly created Planned Giving Program.

THE CHARLES D. KAKUK LEGACY SOCIETY

Charles D. Kakuk Sally Marks Jan Martin Milan and Gordana Racic Dick and Diane Wright Bettie Zillman

The Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society recognizes individuals who made a lasting impact on Next Act Theatre through their generous planned gift. To learn more about including Next Act Theatre in your planned giving, please call Jane Flieller, Development Director, at 414-278-7780 or email jane@nextact.org.



COMMUNICATIONS

Communication with our patrons is a high priority. NAT publishes five newsletters per year which highlight our upcoming productions with articles focusing on why plays were chosen along with background information on the playwrights and the play's subject matter. Highlights also include upcoming rental performances, development and marketing updates and any special events. The newsletter is mailed out and emailed to our patrons.

NAT maintains a Facebook page and a website, www.nextact.org, for quick and up-to-date information. Patrons receive regular email blasts with pertinent information that makes the NAT experience more enjoyable. After every performance, attendees receive an email message asking for feedback about the show and their experience at the theatre.

RENTALS

NAT provides an affordable rental venue for small, emerging and touring companies. Dance, theatre, music and comedy have all graced the NAT stage over the years. By having other groups in our space:

- 1. NAT patrons learn of and may attend rental productions.
- 2. NAT may attract new patrons from rental productions.
- 3. Additional revenue is earned through rental and concession income.

Scheduled to make the NAT venue their new artistic home in 2020-21, Renaissance Theaterworks was unable to start producing live theatre until COVID vaccinations made it possible in March 2021. Renaissance Theaterworks plans to take up full artistic residency in fall 2021.

FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

Fundraising activities were curtailed because of the pandemic but within the 2020-21 season we still had fun by orchestrating online and recently, in-person events!

- Our holiday campaign was accompanied by a \$10,000 matching challenge grant from the Dorothy Inbusch Foundation. The response was overwhelming, doubling our campaign goal.
- The annual gala, canceled the previous spring, made an appearance as a virtual event in March 2021. With a large assortment of silent auction items, a live auction, fabulous entertainment and Milwaukee funnyman Doug Jarecki as emcee, *Bravo, Next Act 2021!* was a great success, making 260% of goal!
- With assistance from Renaissance Theaterworks, who will move their artistic programming to the NAT venue in the 2021-22 season, the necessary capital was raised to install an Ionization System into the HVAC system of the building, providing better air filtration in response to COVID concerns. Hand sanitizing stations were installed throughout the building as well.
- Our annual Producer's Circle event, usually held in the fall for those contributing a thousand dollars a year or more to NAT, was postponed until late spring 2021, at which time we invited a limited number of donors to view *Natural Shocks* prior to its public viewing. The film was followed by a talkback with the production's actor and director.



WHAT OUR PATRONS SAY

We felt [*The Christians*] was **one of the best pieces of "filmed theater" we've seen so far**. I am so glad that theater folk are discovering how to bring out the best. – Patron, *The Christians*

Last Saturday a group of us agreed to participate in a play discussion based on *The Christians*. Each couple watched the play on their own then used Zoom to discuss it last Saturday. Our friends made the discussion engaging, interesting and informative but make no mistake that *it only happened because of the Next Act performance and brilliant videography* that brought the play to us. – Patron, *The Christians*

Loved the show and especially enjoyed the opportunity to take part in the talk-back. Not only does the show elicit great discussion about our current educational system, but it's also a morality tale that asks the hard questions about what we should be teaching, the role of standardized tests vs. other forms of evaluation and how we can give voice and respect to teachers' points of view. Each member of the cast was spot on, with insightful and innovative directing by Marti Gobel and the tech crew, negotiating the challenges of COVID. – Patron, *Principal Principle*

Great acting. Great directing. Great set. Never tedious, even though set primarily in one room. Great script. Provocative themes. Music enhanced the action, did not distract from it. *Superior and sophisticated camera work - felt like a live performance.* This is my second experience of Next Act pulling off such a sophisticated production via virtual media. Most impressive. – Patron, *Principal Principle*

We have been Next Act subscribers for a number of years and 9 Circles ranks among the top two or three plays *we've seen.* – Patron, 9 Circles

The performances in this play were outstanding. Cotey's direction was amazing. The incorporation of the wandering one camera shot was brave and effective. I felt like I was in the theater and that I could frame those shots somehow with my own eyes. Huzzah to the technical people, costumes, sound, set and lighting. Well done. *In my mind, this is the kind of theater Next Act excels at and should be recognized for.* – Patron, *9 Circles*

It was very well done. While I can imagine its being done in the intimate atmosphere of Next Act Theatre, it lent itself very well to the size of a computer screen. *We were completely drawn in by the sounds, the closeups and the changes of scenes* ... all done so well. – Patron, *Natural Shocks*

This show exemplifies one of the main reasons I subscribe to Next Act. You don't give us "run of the mill" productions that I could easily see someplace else. It held my attention to the very end with the greatest "shock." I would love to know what the stage would have looked like if it had been seen "live." – Patron, Natural Shocks



NEXT ACT THEATRE STAFF

Producing Artistic Director David Cecsarini

Education Manager Grace DeWolff

Technical Director Mike Van Dreser **Development Director** Jane Flieller

Administrative Coordinator Libby Amato

Community Liaison Malaina Moore Marketing Director A.J. Magoon

Ticket Office Manager Christine Yündem

Resident Stage Manager Jessica Connelly

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Jane Lukic Consultant, Wheel & Sprocket/Kegel's Inn

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Donna Martynski APTAR, Inc. (Retired) John McGivern Actor, Writer, Comedian

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