

## THE KING'S THE THING

by David Ceccarini

**Back in the 60s,** Milwaukee's big pop radio station was WOKY-920 AM on your radio dial (when there were dials). While I was mostly into the big band sound due to playing sax in our school's jazz band, I was just opening up my very limited, 15 year-old cultural horizon to more current music offerings for teens.

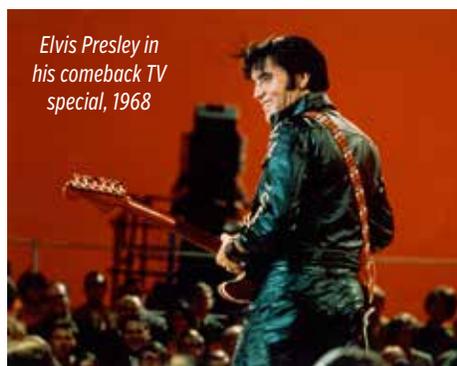
In those days, and specifically 1969, the pop charts were inclusive and eclectic, where you'd find Neil Diamond's *Sweet Caroline* sidling up to Sly and the Family Stone's *Everyday People*, *Jean* by Oliver (Jean, Jean, roses are red...) following Three Dog Night's *Easy To Be Hard* and Henry Mancini's *Love Theme from Romeo and Juliet*. The Fifth Dimension, Creedence, Marvin Gaye, The Beatles (approaching the break-up), Blood, Sweat and Tears, The Doors, Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan – it was a grand and glorious cross-section of contemporary American sound...radio had not yet splintered off into niche markets. Come to think of it, maybe that's what started us down the democracy-smothering pathway of political and cultural isolationism we're struggling with today? But, as usual, I digress.

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### COMING BACK

Popping through my burgeoning pop music awakening was one artist I certainly knew about – the so-called king of Rock 'n Roll is kind of tough to ignore – but hadn't taken seriously as a modern artist of my generation. One knows next to nothing at 15. A profusely sweating and black leather-clad Elvis had just done his comeback TV special on NBC the year before, mounting an all-out offensive to distance himself from the teeny-bopper, dime-a-dozen movies he'd been making since getting out of the U.S. Army. *Suspicious Minds* hit the #1 spot on the charts, and was soon followed by a very different tune for the 50s hip-swinger, *In The Ghetto*, written by Mac Davis.



Elvis Presley in his comeback TV special, 1968

Davis' original title was "*The Vicious Circle*" – accurate, yes, about poverty and guns in our cities (frustratingly, still relevant), but a bit too literal. *In The Ghetto*, given a soulful rendition by Elvis, made me think, "Hey, this guy's telling a serious story about our times. I'll listen further." And that was it. My close-and-personal time with The King had begun.



Alexandra Bonesho, Carrie Hitchcock, and David Ceccarini in HERESY

As is inevitable with an actor, eventually one impersonates one's idol. And out it came – at Purdue, at American Players Theatre, at Bing and The King fundraisers, at Green Lake for the Brookfield mayor's retirement party (thank you Marsha Kuligowski for the brilliant white jumpsuit), and finally at Next Act in our Crackdown Cabaret of 2014. The Cabaret indulged one of my deepest fantasies, to sing *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, a la Elvis, with back-up singers.

Shameless, but we needed an ending.

All this is to explain how ersatz-Elvis made it onto the cover of Next Act's 2022-23 season brochure. With my impending retirement from Next Act Artistic Director duties, we thought it'd be fun to take our own spin on the classic concert security riff, "Elvis has left the building."

Shameless, but we needed a cover.

### THE 2022-23 SEASON

But now, to the point of all this rambling: inside the brochure is a description of a terrific season of

*Continued, next page*

live theatre you won't get to see anywhere else in Milwaukee. In a sense, this 2022-23 season is my Producing Artistic Director tribute to the Next Act audience that has embraced, supported and engaged with our work for more than 30 years. You have expected much, appreciated more and offered feedback, advice and praise in the spirit of generosity that, somehow, can always be counted on from live theatre patrons. Thank you for "getting it."

**ON WE GO TOGETHER**

It is my sincere hope that patrons will fill up our seats this entire season. As subscribers, as single ticket buyers, students or tour groups, we welcome and have room for all of you. My successor will be joining us in October, and nothing could make me more proud of what we've accomplished together than to welcome him, her or them with full houses.

Your enthusiastic presence will send a clear message that you believe in Next Act and will be present and accounted for as we press into the future.

Let's pack the place, just like an Elvis concert. When it's crowded, it's always more fun.

See you at the theatre. And, uh, thank you very much.

**THANK YOU... AND BRAVO!**

*by Jane Flieller, Development Director*



**I love a good party.** Lots of friends, food and festivities. I especially loved hosting Bravo, Next Act, 2022 on Saturday, June 11, 2022 because we came together – in-person for the first time in two years – to celebrate an extraordinary year for Next Act Theatre. The success of both the season and the event, is thanks to you – our patrons.

Your belief and support in what we do keeps us going. Your contributions of time to attend shows and events as well as your generous monetary gifts, makes it possible for us to produce four plays a year that bring audiences joy and reflections, sparking discussions and thought. It affords us the opportunity to bring free arts education to hundreds of high school students each year through in-school workshops, student matinees and our Next Act: Summer Theatre for Teens program. For all that, **BRAVO TO YOU!**



**THANK YOU... AND BRAVO!**

*by Jane Flieller, Development Director*

**A very special thank you** to Werner Krause, who matched our educational appeal. With his match, we raised \$20,000 for our educational programming. **Bravo, Werner!**

**Thank you to our Bravo sponsors – CliftonLarsonAllen/Mike Burzynski and Keller Williams Realty/Annie Jurczyk**

Thank you to those who attended Bravo, participating in games and auctions. We hope you enjoyed the marvelous singers and magician who entertained you. To those who couldn't attend – we missed you and hope to see you soon!

**Thank you to Next Act's -**

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**Performers:** Bree Beelow, Eva Nimmer, Adam Qutaishat, Matt Zembrowski; Faye Bonini and Tom Burgermeister and our auctioneer, Dylan Bolin



*We are deeply grateful to the following businesses and individuals who contributed gift certificates, items and experiences to our auctions:*

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“They’re all true whether they happened or not,” says Rafe in Bill Cain’s *THE LAST WHITE MAN*. He’s talking about theater stories, and there are a lot that get told on stage in Cain’s play. Another character, Charlie, remarks “You people love your theater stories”. The world premiere of *THE LAST WHITE MAN* took place in April and May of 2022 at Next Act, and I would argue as many theater stories were swapped off stage as on. I would often walk through the theatre during the pre-show fight call and hear Brian Gill or JJ Gatesman regaling castmates with tales of mishaps and adventures in other productions.

Along the way, however, *THE LAST WHITE MAN* provided its own entry into the illustrious tradition of theater stories. Here’s one for you – and yes, it’s completely true:

In early April, a week before the show began tech rehearsals, COVID-19 hit *THE LAST WHITE MAN* team, taking an actor and, two days later, our stage manager out of commission. These were the first positive cases in a cast or crew member at Next Act since the pandemic started. As has happened with many companies across Milwaukee, it was time to get creative.

Fortunately, close-to-local actor, artist and all-around good guy Neil Brookshire was up for a challenge. [You may recognize Neil from Milwaukee Chamber Theatre’s 2021 production of *THE THANKSGIVING PLAY* or Peninsula Players’ 2021 *ROMANCE IN D*. Keep an eye out for him in early 2023 on our stage in *THERE IS A HAPPINESS THAT MORNING IS*.] In less than a week, Neil completely stepped into the role of Rafe. He learned the blocking, set down the script and even confidently picked up a sword for several complex fights.



Neil Brookshire as Rafe in THE LAST WHITE MAN

Photo by Ross Zentner

Let’s pause to consider this for a second: in a play about an understudy replacing the actor playing Hamlet, we had an understudy replacing the actor playing the understudy replacing the actor playing Hamlet. Many folks pointed out the serendipitous humor of the situation – writing for the Journal Sentinel, Jim Higgins noted, “If Next Act had not announced it, no one would have guessed, as Brookshire fits in seamlessly.”

Meanwhile, up in the booth, Deck Chief/COVID Safety Officer Natasha Goeller was learning the ropes as the show’s Stage Manager. As Neil was working to step in as Rafe, Nat was figuring out how to make the show run smoothly, handling the timing of the lights and sound to pull off the show’s technical elements. In a testament to their hard work, everything went off without a hitch.

...at least through opening night.

After a successful world premiere debut, the cast came back for their first two-show day, Saturday, April 15. Everyone took rapid antigen COVID tests – and we had another cast member test positive. We scrambled to call off shows for the day—the only two shows Next Act had to cancel in our entire 2021-22 season—and a PCR test confirmed the bad news: we had another positive case in the cast.



Bailey Wegner, David Ceasarini, Demetria Thomas, Ryan Zierk & Jonathan Wainwright in the first public reading of THE LAST WHITE MAN

There was one person who, above anyone else, was familiar with the Charlie role – he had read the role during our staged reading of the play in December 2021. *THE LAST WHITE MAN* director and Next Act Producing Artistic Director David Ceasarini was the one to save the day this time, stepping into the role of Charlie with less than 24 hours notice. Script in hand, he went onstage on Sunday and we were able to complete our opening weekend.

If you’re keeping score, by the second week of *THE LAST WHITE MAN* performances, Charlie, the famous movie star actor who mysteriously leaves

the production of *HAMLET*, was being played by the director of the play; Rafe, the ambitious understudy, was again being played by the original actor, but understudy Neil Brookshire was sticking around to do the swordfights for David’s role; and our original stage manager was back and managing the show once more. Again, audiences had a field day; critic Anne Siegel stated David “did a magnificent job in replacing the missing actor.”

Finally, in the third week of the production, all was restored. Ken Miller, JJ Gatesman, Brian J. Gill and Demetria Thomas appeared on stage as cast, with Jessica Connelly in the booth. For the final two weeks of performances, actors fought, quit productions and struggled with the question of whether “to be, or not to be” – but only within the confines of the play. *THE LAST WHITE MAN* successfully closed with no further issues.



Ken Miller as Charlie and JJ Gatesman as Rafe in THE LAST WHITE MAN

Photo by A.J. Magoon

This production started with four actors. It ended up with six. Five of them got a shot at Hamlet – the “ultimate white man,” as director Xandri states. And each actor, along with the full cast, the production team and everyone working behind the scenes, helped shape a production that now enters theatrical mythology. “Oh man, remember when the actor playing the understudy was an understudy? Remember when the director played the role for a week?”

Next Act has a storied history with Bill Cain and his plays: from the first production of *EQUIVOCATION*, massive and sensational; to the intimacy of *HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE*; to *9 CIRCLES*, cancelled, then remounted, filmed and in your face. Finally, *THE LAST WHITE MAN* – a world premiere, and one that offered plenty of twists and turns along the way. In 2023, we’ll stage Bill’s *GOD’S SPIES*, and who knows what kind of stories will stem from that production!

For now, all that’s left to do is to thank you: if you joined us for *THE LAST WHITE MAN*, you were part of the story of the production, with all its twists and turns. It may be over, but none of us will stop thinking about it anytime soon.

Good night, sweet prince(s).

2021-22 Season by the Numbers

by A.J. Magoon

While the story behind *THE LAST WHITE MAN* is exciting, it’s not the only story in our 2021-22 season. In fact, our most recent season was a story in and of itself: a success story, as we returned to in-person theatre and welcomed audiences back to Next Act. A story of community, learning, growing and sharing. Here are some of the numbers that help encapsulate another wonderful season of live theatre:

- Nearly **7,000** attendees (including 350 students!)
- 4** Plays
- 11,590** minutes of theatre (8+ days!)
- 25** jars of pickled herring given away during *RED HERRING* (thanks to Bay View Packing Company)
- 1** preview reading of *THE LAST WHITE MAN*
- 200** virtual viewers
- 1** incredible community of theatregoers!
- 1** reading of *GOD’S SPIES* (2022-23 season)

Thank you for joining us for our 2021-22 season and being part of our story. We hope to see you again for more plays next season

## Upcoming Events in Next Act's Performance Space

As part of our community mission, Next Act offers the theatre space for rent. Each producer is solely responsible for the content and quality of their performances. Here's what they have to say about their upcoming productions.

**Rech Entertainment** presents  
**MCGUIRE**



Written by Al McGuire's Hall of Fame broadcast partner Dick Enberg and performed by acclaimed Tony Award-winning actor and Marquette alumnus Anthony Crivello, MCGUIRE shows off the passion and personality of the coach that brought a NCAA Men's College Basketball National Championship to Milwaukee. Presented by Heiser Automotive Group. **July 14 - 31. \$55 - \$60. On sale now.**

**Schmitz 'n Giggles** presents



**THE COMEDY OF DRACULA ... KINDA SORTA**

Join some of Milwaukee's favorite comedic talents in a re-telling of Bram Stoker's classic gothic horror novel. Dracula decides to pull some shenanigans in England by turning all the women into vampires one neck at a time. Will the brave Van Helsing and her inept crew be able to defeat him? Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, it's sure to be a delicious evening of laughter with a side dish of culture...kinda sorta. **August 11 - 13. \$25. On sale now.**

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**WHAT'S NEXT** is a quarterly publication of Next Act Theatre  
255 S. Water Street | Milwaukee, WI 53204 • 414-278-7780 • www.nextact.org • email info@nextact.org  
Editors A.J. Magoon & David Ceasarini Layout Rose Delaney

## Educational Excellence Award



**In June 2022**, Next Act Theatre was honored to receive the 7th annual Educational Excellence Award presented by the [Sharon Lynne] Wilson Center Bridge Committee. This award recognizes organizational achievement of a non-profit that exemplifies collaboration in the arts for its mission to transform lives and connect communities through inspiring performances, community engagement, education and training. Next Act thanks Steve and Nancy Einhorn for their nomination.

Next Act Theatre's educational initiatives include special school matinees, accompanying pre- and post-show workshops and Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens program, currently enjoying its 24th year! All of Next Act's education programs are offered at no cost to schools or students to participate. Lunches and snacks are provided daily through the summer program.

## YOU'RE INVITED!

Support the work of Next Act's award-winning education program, and come hear what's on our students' minds!

Re-told  
fairy tales!  
Original works!  
Improvised  
games!

*The Next Actors*

*Variety Show*

Join us for The Next Actors Variety Show! The full creative power of our 2022 Next Actors is on display in this active, imaginative, 60-minute final presentation.

Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens is an award-winning, tuition-free program for students who learn the crafts of playwriting and performance as they write, rehearse and perform a completely original work. This performance is their final showcase after four creative weeks of class and one more week of touring to local venues and connecting artistically to their community.

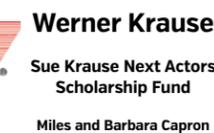
**One Day Only: Saturday, July 23, 2022 at 4:00 p.m.**

All tickets \$5

General Admission

Visit [nextact.org](http://nextact.org) or call **(414) 278-0765** for tickets

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by Bill Cain  
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