



# Annual Company Report

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



## 2023-2024



Not everyone can say that in their first season as Artistic Director and Managing Director, they achieved the highest-grossing season at the box office in the theatre's history—but we can! We loved having you with us to experience four distinct and powerful stories. From the exploration of environmental racism in *Splash Hatch* to the festive mystery of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, from Heidi Armbruster's heartfelt narrative in *Scarecrow* to the raw and honest portrayals in *The Treasurer*, each production has been a testament to the diverse and compelling work we strive to present.

For 34 years, our theatre has been dedicated to engaging hearts and minds, stimulating thought, and fostering new perspectives. We couldn't share these vital stories without you—our loyal patrons and supporters. Even with increased subscriptions and single-ticket sales, the financial demands of maintaining a professional theatre are significant. Your continued support is crucial to our success and our ability to bring these important stories to life.

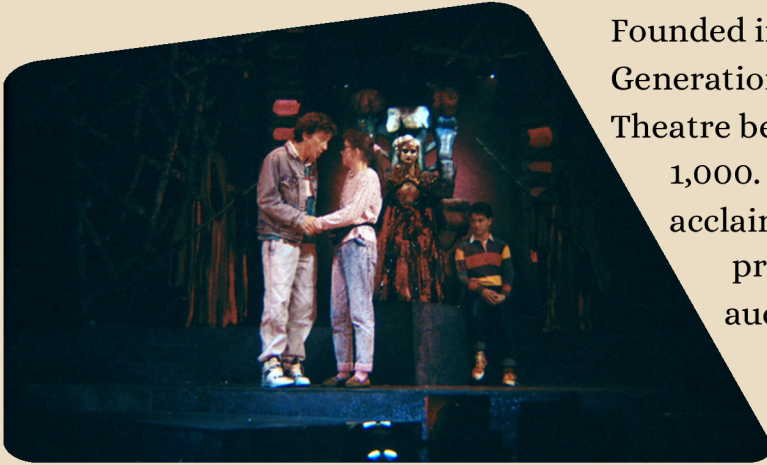
Thank you for being an essential part of our journey.



Cody Estle  
Artistic Director

Libby Amato  
Managing Director

# History 1990-2024



A Wrinkle in Time, 1990

Founded in 1990 after the merging of Next Generation Theatre and Theatre Tesseract, Next Act Theatre began with a modest subscriber base of 1,000. Our early seasons were met with critical acclaim, though our nomadic playing spaces proved to be a challenge for attracting new audiences. By early 2000, the Off-Broadway Theatre was established, along with a dedicated rehearsal space, in Milwaukee's Third Ward.

1997 marked the beginning of our Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens program, which recently celebrated its 26th year. Next Actors is a free-of-charge program that gives up to 30 students the opportunity to experience playwriting and performance with the guidance of professional teaching artists, culminating in a week-long performance tour to community and senior centers and a final benefit performance here at Next Act.

In 2011, we were thrilled to complete construction on the dedicated 152-seat space that we now occupy in Milwaukee's Harbor District. Within four seasons in the new space, Next Act had retired all construction debt. In recent seasons we have continued to grow into our new space, completed theatre improvement projects, and welcomed new patrons.

In the 2022-23 season, David Cecsarini retired as Producing Artistic Director, a role he had held at the theatre for 30 years, handing the reins to current Artistic Director Cody Estle. Early in the 2023-24 season, longtime Next Act staff member Libby Amato was promoted to the position of Managing Director, which had been left vacant since the passing of longtime Managing Director, Charles Kakuk.

Next Act Theatre continues to offer a four-production season of compelling and thought-provoking plays, enjoying a loyal and growing patron base. The company is particularly noted for our acting excellence, accessible performance style and a varied and consistently interesting selection of stories. Next Act has mounted more than 100 main stage productions, many of them being area premieres, and seven original scripts.



Producing Artistic Director Emeritus, David Cecsarini and longtime Managing Director, Charles Kakuk



# Season Programming

Our 34th Season opened with Kia Corthron's **SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN**. Directed by Cheryl Lynn Bruce and featuring Jada Jackson, Joseph Brown Jr., James Carrington, Kristin E. Ellis, and Malaina Moore, **SPLASH HATCH** was sponsored by J. Michael Reavis and Judges John and Jean DiMotto.

During the run, Next Act offered our second ever Black Out Night for a nearly sold-out, all black-identifying audience. The performance was followed by a reception catered by Mobay Cafe, a local black-owned business, and featured a talkback allowing members of the audience to share their thoughts and experiences.

Additional talkbacks, featured partnerships with African American Roundtable, Alice's Garden, Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, Habitat for Humanity, Milwaukee Riverkeeper, My Sista's KeepHer, Nearby Nature Milwaukee, and Teens Grow Greens to provide a deeper understanding of the production.



Jada Jackson and Malaina Moore, photo by Michael Brosilow

**We feel it is important for us to absorb the issues conveyed in this play. We talked about it all the way home during our 1 hour drive and also this morning. The issues are displayed in a real, raw way that does not blame or shame. That is what I like about the play content. SPLASH HATCH Patron Comment**

Opening in November, Agatha Christie's **THE MOUSETRAP** quickly became the highest-grossing production in Next Act's history. Directed by Mary MacDonald Kerr, **THE MOUSETRAP** featured Lillian Brown, Josh Krause, Rudy Galvan, Margaret Casey, Doug Jarecki, Libby Amato, Jonathan Gillard Daly, and Casey Hoekstra, and was sponsored by Jan Serr and John Shannon, and Sandra Zingler.



Libby Amato, Lillian Brown, Rudy Galvan, Doug Jarecki, Jonathan Gillard Daly, and Josh Krause, photo by Michael Brosilow

Next Act offered our first ever Bookclub Night and welcomed Dr. Christopher Chan, an International Goodwill Ambassador for Agatha Christie Limited, to many of the show's talkbacks.

**Although I always enjoy the performances, this was among the best ones I've seen. The scenery, the timing, the pace of the show - excellent... You really outdid yourself with this one.**

**MOUSETRAP Patron Comment**



A Wisconsin premiere, Heidi Armbruster's **SCARECROW** opened in February. Directed by Laura Gordon and featuring Wisconsin native Heidi Armbruster telling her own story of coming back to her family's farm, SCARECROW met with great critical and commercial success and was sponsored by Bob Balderson

Talkbacks featured Hospice and Palliative Care Specialist Dr. Sean Marks, and Toomas Mitt of the Stories Project.

**It was brave, vulnerable and spoke to the humanity of navigating the passing of a parent and the aftermath... I found myself nodding, smiling, laughing and struggling along with the playwright as her story unfolded. I felt and heard others around me in the audience do the same.**

### SCARECROW Patron Comment



Heidi Armbruster, photo by Michael Brosilow



Reese Madigan and Annabel Armour, photo by Michael Brosilow

Closing out our 34th season, Max Posner's **THE TREASURER** was Artistic Director Cody Estle's Next Act directorial debut. Featuring Reese Madigan, Annabel Armour, David Flores, and Alexis Green, THE TREASURER was sponsored by Marianne and Sheldon Lubar, Donna Martynski, and John McGivern. It handily exceeded all of its sales goals.

Talkback guests from the Alzheimer's Association and Hospice and Palliative Care Specialist Dr. Sean Marks were invited to share information about their program with our patrons.

**The Treasurer was indeed an inspiring play - structure and script of play were very clear and informative, cast choice was perfect and well performed, mixture of humor and sadness, very emotional but not depressing - rather allowing one to look at one's own relationships and concepts of love and duty. THE TREASURER**

### Patron Comment

Next Act also hosted two staged readings during our 24-25 season, including Kia Corthron's **COME DOWN BURNING** (directed by Cheryl Lynn Bruce and featuring Anya Palmer, Ashley Jordan, Kaylene Howard, Cambryelle Getter, DeShawn Thomas and Martilia Marechal) and Heidi Armbruster's **MRS. CHRISTIE** (directed by Laura Gordon and featuring Elyse Edelman, Cassandra Bissell, Grace Berendt, Casey Hoekstra, Kaylene Howard, Joe Picchetti, Jenny Wanasek, and Michael Stebbins). The standing-room only reading of Mrs. Christie was a hit.



Kaylene Howard, Casey Hoekstra, Grace Berendt, Elyse Edelman, Cassandra Bissell, Joe Picchetti, Jenny Wanasek, Michael Stebbins, and Heidi Armbruster, photo by Caroline Norton

# Education & Outreach

## Next Actors, Summer Theatre for Teens

Next Actors 2023 served an intimate and focused group of students. Each student was able to take the lead on their own short play, and the finale performance consisted of all three short pieces. The plays featured strong themes of fantasy and found family and was aptly entitled: "Belonging Shouldn't Be a Fantasy."

This was Education Manager Pia Russo's first summer managing Next Actors after taking up her position in earnest in January 2023. The 2023-24 Next Actors also saw the return of long-time Next Actor Ryleigh Carrol - this time as a mentor! Pia and Riley were also joined by Teaching Assistant Kelsie Kasky, an Senior Education Student at Marquette University.

The students collaborated to create a variety show of short plays that highlighted the importance of found family and being your authentic self. The show toured to various senior and community centers for a week before taking its' final bow in Next Act's theatre in front of family, friends, and supporters.



**I would come back to Next Actors again because I have been a part of it for 5 years and it's like my second home.**

**23-24 Program Participant**

2022-23 Next Actors with Education Manager Pia Russo, Mentor Ryleigh Carrol, and Teaching Assistant Kelsie Kasky, photo by A.J. Magoon

## Student Matinees, Workshops, and Community Project

Our high school matinee series provides low- to no-cost performances for each production in our season that is age-appropriate. This year, we welcomed 179 students from Hamilton, Rufus King, Reagan, Oak Creek, and Cudahy High Schools to **SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN** and **SCARECROW**.

440 students participated in pre- and post-show workshops meant to help deepen their understanding of the play. Kia Corthron's SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN served as our student community project this year; students were asked to write either a letter to the playwright or a short sequel to SPLASH HATCH. The letters were sent to playwright Kia Corthron, and some of the students were treated to a reading of their plays by Jada Jackson and Malaina Moore, two actors from the show.



## Talkbacks and Personal Previews

Next Act offers talkbacks and pre-show chats throughout the season. Next Act Staff and artists hosted many of the informal discussions, often including guest speakers from relevant fields to provide insight into issues discussed in the plays. Talkbacks this year included guests from: African American Roundtable, Alice's Garden, Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, Habitat for Humanity, Milwaukee Riverkeeper, My Sista's KeepHer, Nearby Nature Milwaukee, Teens Grow Greens, Dr. Christopher Chan (an International Goodwill Ambassador for Agatha Christie Ltd.)

Dr. Sean Marks (a Hospice and Palliative Care Specialist at Froedtert Hospital), Toomas Mitt of the Stories Project, and the Alzheimer's Association.



**The talkback with Heidi was wonderful and enlightening for all of us. Thank you for giving us such an impactful experience!**

Scarecrow talkback participant

## Newsletters and Communication

Communication with our patrons is a top priority. Next Act publishes five newsletters per year highlighting our upcoming productions with articles that focus on why plays were chosen, background information on playwrights and the play's subject matter. Highlights also include upcoming rental performances, development and marketing updates, and information about special events. The newsletter is mailed and emailed to our patrons. Next Act maintains a Facebook page, an Instagram account, Tiktok, a YouTube account, and a website, [www.nextact.org](http://www.nextact.org), for quick and up-to-date information. Patrons receive regular email blasts with pertinent information to make the Next Act experience more enjoyable. After every performance, attendees receive an email message asking for feedback about the show and their experience at the theatre.

## Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Next Act welcomes emerging artists of color to participate in paid internships in the areas of directing, stage management, design, or administration. Interns have the opportunity to work one-on-one 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, provide networking opportunities and encourage emerging artists to keep Milwaukee as their home base. 2023-24 IEO interns included Dr. Mohammad ElBsati (Directing, THE TREASURER) and Martilia Marechal (Sound Design, THE MOUSETRAP).

# Impact 2023-24

**116** PERFORMANCES OF  
7 PLAYS

**350**

STUDENTS SERVED FROM  
6 SCHOOLS

**628**

INDIVIDUAL DONORS

**9,572**

AUDIENCE MEMBERS

**1,026**

SEASON SUBSCRIBERS

**79**

ARTISTS AND STAFF  
EMPLOYED

**13**

COMMUNITY OUTREACH  
PARTNERS



Next Act staff at Bravo, 2024, A.J. Magoon, Christine Yünder, Cody Estle, Katie Anderson, Pia Russo, Tawnie Thompson, Libby Amato, Caroline Norton, Shelby Kaishian, Nat Goeller, Ariana Manghera, Photo by Mark Frohna



# Fundraising & Development

Next Act was incredibly pleased to meet or exceed all of our 2023-24 fundraising goals. In addition to our planned activities, we were also grateful to receive anonymous funds for special projects. One anonymous donor made it possible to replace the aging washer and dryer in our laundry room and to re-vamp some of the aging infrastructure in our green room, making the space more comfortable for artists to spend their time with us. Another anonymous donation kickstarted a Professional Development Program for our Staff. Some of the funds were put to work to send Managing Director Libby Amato, Artistic Director Cody Estle, and Marketing Director A.J. Magoon to the Theatre Communications Group conference in Chicago.



Members of Next Act's Producer's Circle listen to a pre-show discussion with Cody Estle, Laura Gordon, and Heidi Armbruster, photo by Tawnie Thompson

Next Act's Producer's Circle event took place in December; Producer's Circle members were invited for catered hors d'oeuvres, cocktails, and a curated discussion with Playwright Heidi Armbruster, Director Laura Gordon, and Next Act Artistic Director Cody Estle before enjoying a staged reading of Heidi's play MRS. CHRISTIE. The event was a rousing success.



Dave Anderson at Bravo 2024, photo by Mark Frohna

Our Annual Fundraising Gala, Bravo Next Act, held on May 23rd, was offsite for the first time since 2012. Hosted at Broken Bat Brewing, the event exceeded all fundraising goals, and a wonderful time was had by all as we celebrated "A Night of Firsts." Entertainment was provided by local performers who told their own short stories of their first experiences of something new. Longtime supporter and Board Member Dave Anderson was honored at the event for his long history of service and for his contributions to Next Act over so many years.

The 2-year, \$225,000 Tribute Campaign was completed, raising 106% of its goal by the end of the 2023-24 Fiscal Year.

Much of the money raised has already been put to work to help Next Act modernize our facilities and technologies in addition to supporting new staff and a variety of other exciting updates.

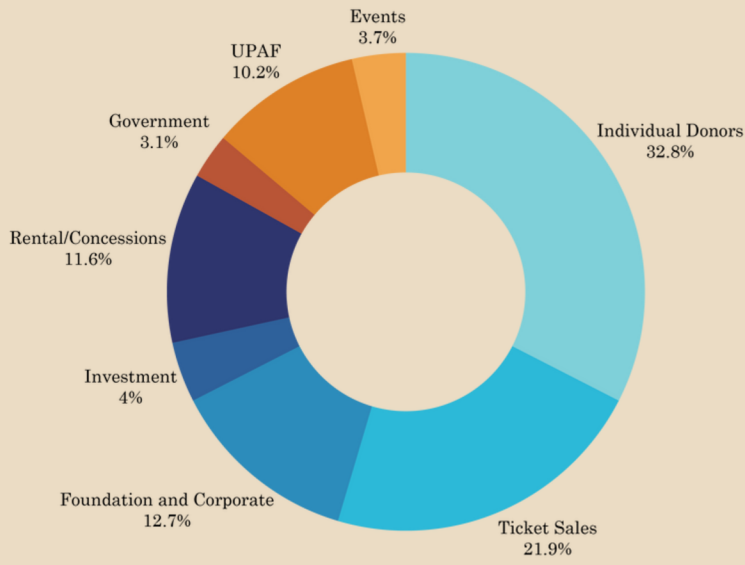
June saw a team of Next Act staff and supporters collectively ride their bikes a total of 200 miles through the city with thousands of other participants to raise funds for the United Performing Arts Fund Ride for the Arts.



A.J. Magoon, Cathy Jakicic, David Ccesarini, Libby Amato, Greg Soya, Katie Anderson, Sean Fanning, Cody Estle, Ethan Eichstedt-Anderson, Tawnie Thompson and Ian Johnson at the UPAF Ride for the Arts

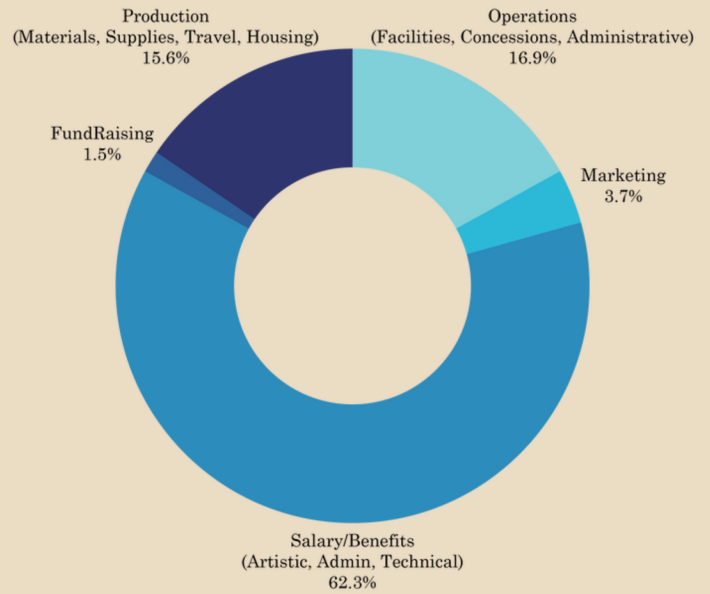
# Financial Overview

## Income



Total: \$1,158,385

## Expenses



Total: \$1,269,417

## 2023-24 Rentals

Next Act provides an affordable rental venue for small, emerging, and touring companies. Dance, theatre, music, and comedy groups have all graced the Next Act stage over the years. By welcoming other groups into our space we are able to supplement our income with rental fees and concessions sales while familiarizing new patrons with our building and creating a mutually beneficial relationship with other companies. Next Act welcomed Bombshell Theatre Co., Brew City Opera, and RIP Productions during the Summer of 2024.

Next Act welcomes rental inquiries via email at [info@nextact.org](mailto:info@nextact.org).

**The theatre itself was a delight. ... I liked the size, the floor plan, what you offer in the lobby, and the location - so much easier than going downtown. But mainly, it was the comfortable atmosphere of friendly professionalism.**

2023-24 Patron Comment





# 2023-24 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 supporters of our 2023-24 season donated \$1,000+:

Steven Alexander	Greater Milwaukee Foundation	Kathleen McElroy and David Newby
James and Terri Alioto	Colton Charitable Fund	John McGivern and Steve Brandt
David and Patricia Anderson	Judith A. Keyes Family Fund	Dwight and Marleen Morgan
Anonymous (4)	Ildy and Skip Poliner Fund	Daniel P. and Julie Murray
Bader Philanthropies	Rob and Lori Morse Gardenier Fund	Sam Myatt
Robert Balderson	Jami and Joe Hanreddy	David Paris Dentistry
Bert L. and Patricia S. Steigleder	John Payton and Roger Hansen	Carole and Dave Pucely
Charitable Trust	Judith and David Hecker	J. Michael Reavis
Brooke Billick and Susan Bickert	Herzfeld Foundation	Holly Rehberg and Miriam Colton
Brad and Glenna Brin	Richard Hoffmann	Susan Riedel
Marcia Brooks and Edward Hammond	Andrew and Paula Holman	Anna and Dan Robbins
Cheryl Lynn Bruce	Richard and Esther Huiting	Marianne and Matthew Robbins
Michael and Ericka Burzynski	Cathy Jakicic	Robert W. Baird and Co.
CAMPAC	Jewish Community Fund	Mary Ruffolo and Ben Litwin
Angela Carollo and Peter Layde	Jack and Lucy Rosenberg Donor	Howard and Sue Schoenfeld
David Cecsarini and Deborah Staples	Advised Fund	Sempercort Foundation
Cedar Street Charitable Foundation	Johnson Controls Foundation	Jan Serr and John Shannon
Tom and Mary Belle Chatton	Annie Jurczyk and Steve Miller	John and Pamela Shefchik
City of Milwaukee Arts Board	Mark and Virginia Kannenberg	The Shubert Foundation
Clare M. Peters Charitable Trust	Rachel Krause	Dr. Mark and Nancy Smuckler
Patty Compton	Werner Krause	Betty Staples
Margaret Dethloff	Marilyn Kupka	Eileen and George Stone
Judges John and Jean DiMotto	Helen Kuzma	Fred Stratton
Dorothy Inbusch Foundation, Inc.	Mary Ann and Charles LaBahn	Christine Symchych and Jim McNulty
Patrick and Patti Doughman	Sandy Laedtke	Way and Jacquelyn Thompson, Jr.
Sandy Duffy	Laskin Family Foundation, Inc.	Julia and David Uihlein
Dr. Mohammad ElBsai	LCM Funds Real Estate, LLC	David and Cheryl Walker
David S. Flores	Marianne and Sheldon Lubar	WE Energies Foundation
Four Four Foundation	Jane Lukic	William and Janice Godfrey Family
Tim and Sue Frautschi	John Mahony and Evelyn Burdick	Foundation Trust
Pam Frautschi	Vince Martin	Wisconsin Arts Board
The Gardner Foundation	Donna Martynski	Wilfred Wollner, Jr.
Judith Goetz	Thomas and Renee McCutcheon	Leslie Wyrowski
GMAR Youth Foundation, Inc.	Guy and Mary Jo McDonald	Sandra Zingler

## Planned Giving

In honor of Next Act Theatre's Managing Director from 1992 to 2014, the Charles D. Kakuk Legacy Society recognizes individuals who make 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 Tawnie Thompson, Development Manager, at 414-278-7780, ext. 7 or email [tawnie@nextact.org](mailto:tawnie@nextact.org). Unless specified by the donor, all bequeaths will go toward the development of our endowment.

Anonymous	Charles D. Kakuk*	Milan and Gordana Racic*
Bob Balderson	Ross Lloyd	Marian Weinberg*
Dave Glenn	Sally Marks*	Dick and Diane* Wright
Annie Jurczyk	Jan Martin*	Bettie Zillman*

\*Bequest Received

# Next Act Staff

**Artistic Director**

Cody Estle

**Managing Director**

Libby Amato

**Marketing Director**

A.J. Magoon

**Education Manager**

Pia Russo

**Production and Facility Manager**

Katie Anderson

**Ticket Office Manager**

Christine Yündem

**Development Manager**

Tawnie Thompson

**Administrative and Artistic Manager**

Caroline Norton

## Board of Directors

**President**

Brooke Billick

Artisan Partners Limited Partnership (Ret.)

**Vice President**

Haly Besaw

RW Baird

**Secretary**

Donna Martynski

Community Volunteer

**Treasurer**

David Anderson

Johnson Controls (Ret.)

### Directors

Terri Alioto

Community Volunteer

Cody Estle, *ex officio*

Next Act Theatre

Libby Amato, *ex officio*

Next Act Theatre

Anna J. Fig

Milwaukee Public Schools

Paul Barno

Retired

Cathy Jakicic

My Write Mind

Derin Bjugstad

CliftonLarsonAllen

Jane Lukic

Consultant, Wheel & Sprocket, Kegel's Inn

Mike Burzynski

CliftonLarsonAllen (ret.)

Daniel P. Murray

Broadway Law Office

John DiMotto

Circuit Court Judge (ret.)

Susan Schoenfeld

The Leaders Institute

Dr. Mohammad N. ElBsat

Carrier Global, Intl.

Sandra Zingler

Racine School District (ret.)