

SWING STATE



BY REBECCA GILMAN | DIRECTED BY CODY ESTLE

FEBRUARY 11 - MARCH 8, 2026

AUDIENCE GUIDE

WELCOME!

Friends,

One of the first things I said I would do when I became the Artistic Director here at Next Act was to program plays set in Wisconsin. I believe it is important to tell stories that reflect the audience who comes to see them. This production is me keeping that promise.

SWING STATE originally opened in Chicago in 2022, where it was a great success. So much so that it transferred Off-Broadway in New York City. I was able to see the play in New York, and after seeing it, I knew I needed to bring it here. What makes our production especially meaningful is that this is the Wisconsin Premiere of SWING STATE, a play set in the Driftless Area of our state. The play reflects the red and blue of Wisconsin's political landscape. We live next to people who don't always think the same way we do, yet we still have to find common ground to get things done. In our current political climate, that is often much easier said than done.

The play takes place just after the pandemic, and these characters, like all of us, are trying to return to some sense of normalcy. Emotions run high as they struggle to move forward. One of the central questions of the play is: "How do we recover?" And the answer is different for each of us. There was a tremendous amount of grief coming out of those years, and in many ways, we are still recovering. There is a clear marker between who we were before and who we are now.

This is a vulnerable play, for both the actors and the audience. It is beautifully written and reminds me of classic plays that ask actors to simply sit, talk and truly listen to one another. There is a deep hunger in these characters to connect, because connection is fundamentally human.

That is one of the things I love most about live theatre: we gather in a dark room with strangers to share an experience and connect. Losing that during the pandemic was incredibly hard. My hope is that this play reminds us of that human desire to connect and reminds us that, not so long ago, that connection was taken away. It encourages us to seize each day, because we never know what may happen.

Ultimately, this is the hope of SWING STATE: no matter the cards we're dealt, good or bad, we keep going, one day at a time.

Yours,



Cody Estle, director and Artistic Director

Content developed by Artistic Associate Elyse Edelman and the Artistic Team at Next Act

Content Advisory

SWING STATE contains strong language and themes related to suicide, violence, grief, self-harm and drug addiction. The play also includes live gunfire and moments of heightened emotional intensity.

Please note that this guide contains not only important background and context, but also discussion of plot elements that could be considered "spoilers."

Audience Guide Design by Leslie Lopez, Marketing Intern; and A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

SWING STATE was nominated for the 2024 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. In addition to *SWING STATE*, playwright Rebecca Gilman has also written *LUNA GALE*, *BOY GETS GIRL*, *TWILIGHT BOWL*, *SPINNING INTO BUTTER*, *BLUE SURGE*, *THE GLORY OF LIVING*, *THE SWEETEST SWING IN BASEBALL*, *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, *DOLLHOUSE*, *THE CROWD YOU'RE IN WITH* and *A WOMAN OF THE WORLD*. Her plays have been widely produced, including by the Goodman Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, Lincoln Center Theater, Audible Theater, the Public Theater, Manhattan Theatre Club, Hampstead Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Acting Company, New York Theatre Workshop and MCC Theater. Among her many awards are a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Harold and Mimi Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award, the Harper Lee Award, the Scott McPherson Award, the Prince Prize for Commissioning New Work, the Roger L. Stevens Award, the Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright and the George Devine Award. *BOY GETS GIRL* received an Olivier nomination for Best New Play, and she was a finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for *THE GLORY OF LIVING*. Gilman received her MFA in playwriting from the University of Iowa, and she is an artistic associate at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago.



Rebecca Gilman.
Photo: Brian Kuhlmann.

Source: Dramatic Publishing



Elyse Edelman and Jack Lancaster in rehearsal for *SWING STATE*.
Photo: A.J. Magoon



Elyse Edelman, Kelli Strickland and Tami Workentin in rehearsal for *SWING STATE*. Photo: A.J. Magoon

THE ENVIRONMENT

Swing State is a play that portrays the yearnings and challenges of people in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin.

The Driftless Area

While the term “Driftless Area” is widely used, it is not actually a precisely-defined geographic area. Beyond Southwestern Wisconsin, it is also said to include a part of Illinois and, in some accounts, Minnesota and Iowa. Simply put, the Driftless Area is a term used for the part of Southwestern Wisconsin and nearby areas that were never covered by glaciers. Most of Wisconsin and much of the upper Midwest were covered by glaciers long ago before they melted and receded, creating, among other things, the Great Lakes and a lot of rocky soil. But the geology and the landscape of the Driftless Area has a different history and therefore a different kind of physical beauty, including many winding streams heading toward the Mississippi River, plush rolling hills and steep bluffs.

In the play, the great physical beauty and the biological diversity of the area and its wildlife – plants and animals – are featured prominently. Peg and her late husband treasure the many indigenous, long-established flowers and birds, while some of her neighbors are more interested in the value to be had from plowing over old prairie land for cash crops and turning old trees into lumber. These neighbors are not as concerned about invasive plant species or the loss of habitats for birds.

The conflict of agendas between environmentalism and economic growth on the one hand, and development on the other, can be seen in many places in America (and across the world), but it’s a particularly big deal in Southwestern Wisconsin. Because the largely rural area is not the most economically prosperous, some residents’ and businesses’ desire for land development into both farmland and industry fights other residents’ and conservationists’ desire for preservation of the stunning beauty of the historical landscape and ecosystems.

By Wikideas1 - Driftless Area via Wikimedia Commons

ENVIRONMENTALISM

The Legendary Environmentalist of the Driftless Area

Aldo Leopold, author of the environmentalist classic *Sand County Almanac*, lived and worked in the Baraboo, Wisconsin area. The sentiments of Leopold echo many of those expressed by Peg in the play. He wrote:

- Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left.
- We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.
- One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.
- The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: What good is it?
- A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.
- Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.



By Zhagen2024 - Aldo Leopold via Wikimedia Commons

Environmentalism vs. Economic Development in the Driftless Area

As an example of the conflict between environmentalism and economic development, a 140-mile, \$900 million high-voltage power transmission line has been proposed to run through the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. Questions have been raised about why it needs to run through the Driftless Area and what its impact would be on land, wildlife and vegetation. Residents are concerned that the transmission line will damage natural habitats and impact the natural beauty of the landscape, as well as being a noise nuisance. It's pretty clear which side Peg would be on. More information on the project can be found at MariBell Transmission, while information on opposition is being shared in part by an organization called No765Line.

Source: *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

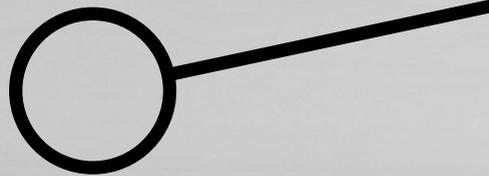
Lumber Prices During the COVID Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a more than 300 percent increase in the U.S. price of softwood lumber. This was caused by labor shortages, as well as an increased demand for lumber in domestic real estate and home improvements. In the play, Sheriff Kris offers to purchase Peg's prairie land to harvest old oak trees on the property, despite Peg's belief that the trees are environmental treasures, in order to capitalize on the short-term spike in lumber prices.

Source: *National Institutes of Health - National Library of Medicine*

FLOWERS & ANIMALS

A number of beautiful and ecologically significant flowers and animals are referenced in *SWING STATE*. Let's learn more about them!



By Luke Seitz - Henslow's Sparrow via Macaulay Library

Henslow's Sparrows

Henslow's Sparrows are extremely secretive little creatures who spend a lot of time poking around grass stalks in weedy fields. They are little - 4 to 5 inches in length with a wingspan of 6 to 8 inches and weight of half a pound. They like to run or walk, but when disturbed by passersby, they take short, erratic flights. They can be found in hayfields, pastures and marshes. Because they rely on these habitats, they are negatively impacted by reduced grassland area. Part of why Peg continues to tend to her prairie is so birds like the Henslow's Sparrow continue to have an habitat to make their homes in.

Source: Luke Seitz / Macaulay Library



By MH Herpetology - Upland Chorus Frog via Wikimedia Commons

Chorus Frogs

"Chorus Frog" is a term that includes several species of tree frogs. They live in thick vegetation and low shrubbery. Chorus frogs typically have a trilling call and a light-colored streak on the upper lip. Most species are about 1 to 1.5 inches long. Peg mentions in the play that these frogs have disappeared from a nearby ephemeral pond, potentially due to runoff from nearby farms.

Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*



Wisconsin's Bat Population



By Joshua Mayer from Madison, WI - Bat via Wikimedia Commons

Bats eat agricultural and forest pests and biting insects, counteracting risks of insect-borne diseases such as West Nile Virus. A fungal disease called White-Nose Syndrome has greatly reduced cave bat populations in the last 10 years. The fungal disease was first discovered in New York in 2006 and has spread across the U.S., reaching Wisconsin in 2014. It has caused the greatest decline of North American wildlife in recorded history. As Peg mentions in the play, there are organizations like the White-Nose Syndrome Response Team that are working to combat this issue and restore bat populations.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Coneflowers

Coneflowers are a widespread late summer bloom which are a favorite of many gardeners. In native Potawatomi, it is known as *ashosikwimia'kuk*, which means "smells like muskrat scent." It's used in herbal teas and natural remedies. With the decline in prairie land, these flowers became endangered in the wild, prompting efforts to preserve and "bank" its seed. When Sheriff Kris asks Peg if anything valuable, other than the tools, were in her barn before the theft, the first thing that Peg mentions are seeds she is drying. This diligent work is necessary to preserve populations of native flowers like these.

Source: Chicago Botanic Garden



By Zhagen2024 - Coneflower via Wikimedia Commons



By Ronin - Knapweed via unsplash

Knapweed

Knapweed is a composite of tiny bright pink-purple flowers surrounded by a crown of long, ragged, pink leaf-like structures. Knapweed is common across the country, and due to its hardy and fast spreading nature, it's considered an invasive plant in North America. Peg and Ryan discuss clearing out knapweed on the prairie, which would create room for other native plants to spread.

Source: The Wildlife Trusts



By Jay Sneade - Burdock via Unsplash

Burdock

Found in woodlands and along roads, burdock is known to many of us as the brown, sticky seed heads that attach themselves to our clothing as we walk. It's also called stickleback, Sticky Jack and Sticky Bob. Like knapweed, burdock is invasive in Wisconsin. When Peg and her late husband first came to the prairie, they had to spend a lot of time clearing out burdock because it spreads so quickly.

Source: The Wildlife Trusts

ACTOR INTERVIEW

In **SWING STATE** by Rebecca Gilman, Jack Lancaster plays Ryan Severson. We are proud to welcome Jack in his Next Act debut, but this is not Jack's first experience with this play! Jack understudied the role of Ryan in both the World Premiere of **SWING STATE** at Goodman Theatre in Chicago and in New York for its Off-Broadway run. We sat down with Jack to talk about his journey with this play and what it means to him.



Jack Lancaster

How did you first become attached to **SWING STATE** in Chicago?

It's something that's been kind of following me over almost four years. This was my first audition for the Goodman [Theatre], and what jumped out was how much it just sounded like a real person. It didn't feel like I had to try harder than I normally would, even though the material was really dramatic. [The character] just sounds like a person. I taped it when I was in Ireland and found out that I got a callback that would be in person, so I ended up having to fly from Ireland back to Chicago early and went in there with [director] Bob Falls and [playwright] Rebecca Gilman.

It was a very cool, gratifying experience. I really loved everyone involved. And we got word a few months later that they ended up taking it Off-Broadway, and that they were bringing the original understudies along, which... that never happens, and it was just very amazing. I remember reopening the book again and just being so excited, I was so moved. I think it was the second time around that I really realized how much I loved the play and how lucky it is to be given a script that brings out the best of everyone. You don't have to go over

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these hurdles of, "how do I make this line make sense or make it sound like a person would speak it?" That work is kind of done for you, and that's, I think, what Rebecca Gilman is really great at. You can see the characters so clearly, and I think everyone can kind of relate in a way, even though they're very flawed characters, Ryan especially. There is a compassion and tenderness to him that I was very drawn to. It's a play that I think even through the past three years, I'm discovering things all the time.

Having spent so much time the role already, what does it mean to actually get to do it full out?

Oh, it's amazing. It was always something that I was looking forward to and hoping that I'd really get to tell the story from beginning to end. We did get one understudy run and I just felt amazing, but it still felt like something I had to get out of my system. I've always been a big fan of Rebecca Gilman's from the moment I really took an interest in theatre. I think that she tells complicated stories, and I think says complicated

things with her writing. You can't really decide if the character is good or bad. I think you're always sort of figuring them out.

What was the experience like preparing to take it Off-Broadway?

There was almost no rehearsal at all. The main cast got there a little bit early to sort of refresh, and it was exactly a year from when we did it. It was October 2022 [in Chicago] and October 2023 [in New York]. It was kind of surprising because the understudies got into New York and sort of went right into runs, rehearsal runs. We didn't really have blocking changes. The set was entirely the same. And the stage was generally [the same], maybe a little bit smaller than in Chicago, which just made it homier. It was just a dream come true. To be in New York for a job was just something I'd wanted to do for a long time.



Tami Workentin and Jack Lancaster in rehearsal for **SWING STATE**.
Photo: A.J. Magoon

Are there parts of Ryan that you see in yourself—or don't see in yourself?

That's a bit of a tug of war because I think the impulse is, for me, how do you find all the ways that we're different? Just sitting in rehearsals watching the main cast do it and getting to actually dive into it myself. I felt in Ryan a real eagerness to connect and have people to talk to, especially about difficult problems in your life. I think that's the feeling of someone who is trying to connect all the time, especially after COVID. Everyone was very isolated, and I think this play does a good job of showing the stories of the people who were desperate to reconnect and feel less solitary versus the people who are trying to pull away even more. And I think the attention and care he pays to the world around him, something as simple as the bugs and the birds being so fascinating to him. That's something that I deeply connect with, and I'm very passionate about biodiversity and the climate, so I love those parts of Ryan.

What was your first exposure to Rebecca Gilman?

It was a play that was directed by Robert Falls, so [SWING STATE] was kind of a full circle moment. They did this play that started at The Goodman called LUNA GALE. I saw that kind of around the time I was touring colleges. And it was sort of one of those things, you know, even before I knew what school I wanted to go to, I wanted to be in Chicago because it just seemed like what came out of there was just on another level. And the same goes for that play. It was just like people who are in really, really difficult circumstances, and you cannot dislike them. You just can't. And so she writes compassion in complicated people really well.

What do you think is the value of doing this play at this particular moment?

It's important to see an area where you're not in a bubble. If you want to be in a bubble, kind of the way to do that is shut yourself out from everyone else and do it by yourself. And [in this play,] you have Republicans and Democrats that are



Jack Lancaster in rehearsal for SWING STATE. Photo: A.J. Magoon

house by house, but they all have each other's house keys, and they all, you know, come over for dinner. And they don't agree with each other, but they are a community. There are lots of people that benefit from us being as divided as we possibly can. At the end of the day, all there are are people. You can choose to really isolate yourself and not be around anyone. I'm not sure that really helps anybody. But that is other people's journey. The most important thing is to have people that you can talk to, and ask for help, and trust that people will be there for you.

Are there things about this production that excite you most?

I'm very excited about its Wisconsin premiere and doing this in an area where the political divide is quite down the center and doesn't really lean one way or the other, [unlike] a lot of these major metropolitan cities. I'm really looking forward to the variety of responses from this. I hope that some people might even see it as a little controversial. And then some people might just resonate with it all the way through. But I do think that everyone will be able to see a little bit of themselves in this, no matter your background.

What do you hope an audience takes away from this play?

When people ask me about it, I'll tell them the name of the play and they ask me if it's political. I think that it is in the sense that very few things are not political. I mean, how far you are from a hospital can be political. All in

all, it doesn't really tell you a way to think, but I think that it's something that accelerates empathy.

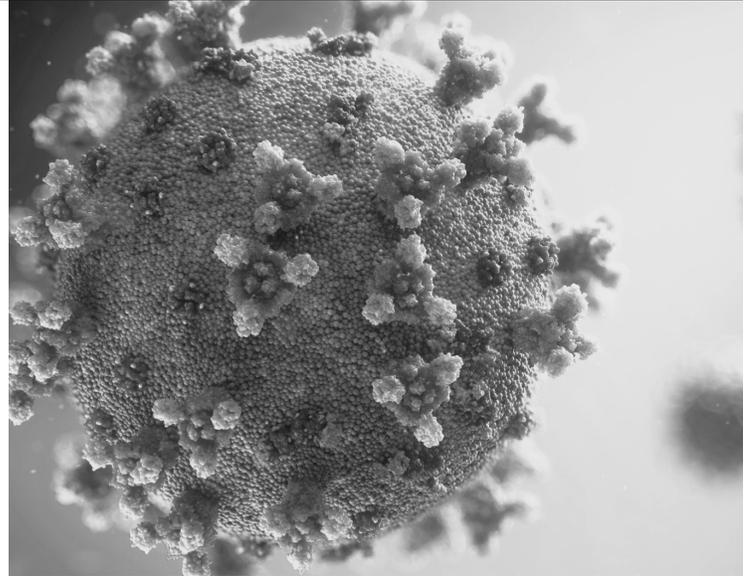
It can be pretty relevant to people who are quietly struggling, and it's probably important to see people that are like them or like people they know. Whether it be the Driftless Area of Wisconsin or Milwaukee, people that are struggling and some of them who are trying to do it all by themselves and carry that weight alone, versus the people that are desperate to reach out to people but don't really know the way to do that. Whether it makes them feel weak or they don't want to be a burden on somebody else or know how to trust the people around them. Most people can probably resonate with that, or if it's not themselves, someone they know. It really celebrates humanity. It takes an era in political history that was very turbulent, and I think it sort of shuts out a lot of the noise and focuses on these four very regular Americans.

I really hope people make the trip. It encourages people to come together, no matter what side of the political spectrum you're on, and I think that these problems are very human. And I think it shows a lot of people that are ready to give up and are desperate for help and connection and don't really know how to find it. And I hope people really connect with that.

CONTEXT: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 was discovered in China in late 2019 and became a topic of discussion in the U.S. in January 2020, when the first U.S. case was reported. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Some other notable dates:

- June 10, 2020 – U.S. reports 2 million cases.
- January 26, 2021 – COVID-19 cases surpass 100 million worldwide, with 2 million deaths.
- August 31, 2021 – The FDA approves the first COVID-19 vaccine.
- October 6, 2021 – The World Health Organization defines “long COVID-19” as a combination of symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, and cognitive dysfunction lasting for months, if not longer.
- November 21, 2021 – The FDA approves booster vaccines for people 18 and older.
- August 5, 2022 – More than 84 million COVID-19 cases are recorded in the U.S.
- May 5, 2023 – The World Health Organization declares an end to the Public Health Emergency of International Concern.



By Fusion Medical Animation - COVID-19 via Unsplash



COVID-19 can also cause or accentuate depression. According to The World Health Organization, anxiety and depression increased by 25 percent worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the play, the greater isolation caused by with the pandemic, combined with aging, loss of loved ones, divorce and more, contributes to many of the characters’ mental health struggles.

Source: Northwestern University website, Cleveland Clinic website

By Louis Prezau - via Unsplash

MORE CONTEXT

Women in Law Enforcement

Two of the four characters in the play are female law enforcement officers. According to data reported by the National Policing Institute, as of 2024, women represented 12 percent of U.S. police officers, a total of 96,000. Fifty years ago, there were only 1,000 female law enforcement officers nationally.

Source: National Policing Institute

Wisconsin Firearm Possession

People with felony convictions cannot legally own or possess firearms under Wisconsin statute 941.29. This applies to actual possession of a firearm as well as “constructive possession”: when a person with a prior felony conviction knows where a firearm is located and can access or exert control over it. In the play, a firearm is stolen from Peg. Discovering its whereabouts, and whether it is actually or constructively possessed by Ryan (who has a prior felony conviction) is an important focus for Sheriff Kris.

Officer-Involved Shootings

Police officer-involved shootings are an issue which arises in the play. An estimated 1,100 to 1,300 members of the public die from police interactions in the U.S. annually, with the great majority involving firearms. An interaction with a police officer in the U.S. is 10 times more likely to end in death than in the United Kingdom. Formerly-incarcerated people encounter disproportionate amounts of police contact. Among the many factors that have been said to affect the rate of police shootings are: inadequate police training, policing tactics, lack of transparency and lack of accountability. Accountability for officer-involved shootings can also be complicated by union contract protections and immunity provisions that affect potential liability, discipline and termination of officers – this is why some officers involved in shootings are placed on paid administrative leave while investigations are conducted. One of the proposed policy solutions to prevent these instances is support for community violence intervention programs and collaboration between violence reduction organizations and law enforcement. The FBI collects and reports National Use-of-Force data online, and data on officer-involved shootings is also reported by the Law Enforcement Epidemiology Project and the National Policing Institute.

Source: The Brady Organization

The Opioid Crisis

The current American opioid crisis is a nationwide spike in addiction and death fueled in part by new painkilling prescription drugs and street drugs obtained both legally and illegally. An excess of 400,000 Americans died from drug overdoses between 2020 and 2023, though annual overdose deaths have declined by more than 25 percent since 2023. While in the past, drug addiction has been depicted as a largely urban issue, the recent opioid crisis has significantly impacted rural areas. In the play, Sheriff Kris’ son died as a result of an accidental drug overdose caused by fentanyl. This synthetic opioid is sometimes mixed into other street drugs, which can lead to an overdose when the user is unaware of what substances they are ingesting.

Source: New York Times

If you or someone you know is considering suicide or self-harm, or is struggling with opioid or other substance abuse disorders, call or text the National Mental Health Hotline at 988, or call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) hotline at 1-800-662-HELP. You are not alone.



SWING STATE

BY **REBECCA GILMAN** | DIRECTED BY **CODY ESTLE**
IS GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY

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