

A Door Opens

by David Cecsarini

I'm doing something new this year.

In the Cecsarini household, we've had a long-standing tradition - out of necessity - that my wife, the extraordinary actress Deborah Staples, pursues work out-of-town during the warm, festival months of summer. Whether in Spring Green at American Players Theatre (APT), Normal, Illinois at Illinois Shakespeare Festival, or more recently in Wisconsin's very own summer playground, Door County, at Door Shakespeare (playing under a huge maple tree), Deborah has shared her artistry with thousands of warm-weather theatre lovers.

As primary camp follower, I have journeyed to witness such marvelous theatrical creations as the sexy, mercurial Amanda in *PRIVATE LIVES* at APT, a delightful, woodsy rendition of *TWELFTH NIGHT*'s Olivia at Door, and Deborah's gender-bending, moment-to-thrilling-moment *HAMLET* at Illinois Shakes.

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This year, however, I've been invited to play the female-averse Benedict opposite Deborah's



Karen Estrada & Deborah Staples in *SILENT SKY*

feisty Beatrice in Door Shakespeare's *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*, thanks to director Joe Hanreddy, and the strong support of our Next Act staff and Board of Directors. Not having ventured away from my Next Act base in quite a few years, this summer sojourn is serving up a fresh perspective on many things, including our work in the theatre as a whole. (Not to mention, I'm having a blast.)

As we rehearse and prepare to share two of Shakespeare's more popular comedies with Door County vacationers, I reflect on Next Act's 2017-18 season with a guarded pride in our collective accomplishment. This past season has been dubbed by many of our supporters as one of our best, and while I consider every season to be exemplary of the Next Act brand, 2017-18 seemed to hit the sweet spot for our audience overall.

STAR STORY

Credit must be given to playwright Lauren Gunderson for her

lovely and inspiring script, *SILENT SKY*, a beautiful story of smart, determined women making their presence known and their value recognized in the male-dominated world of astronomical study. Credit also goes to our stellar cast: Deborah, Carrie, Reese, Karen and Kelly, and also to our production team, with special nod to Aaron Sherkow for his handsome lighting and evocative projections. Gunderson's play brought up important issues for consideration but served with her customary delicacy, and a touch of romanticism; truly, a celebration of the heart.



James Pickering & Tami Workentin in *THE SECRET MASK*

YEAR OF LEAR

Currently, in Milwaukee, James Pickering is undertaking one of Shakespeare's greatest acting challenges, assaying the character of King Lear for Optimist Theatre (at the Peck Pavilion, July 5 - 18, 2018). This caps off a great year for "Pick," who graced the Next Act stage back in November with his moving portrayal of Ernie in Rick Chafe's *THE SECRET MASK*. Ernie was a victim of stroke and delayed fatherhood, and through his struggle to regain language, he received a second chance to

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T. Stacy Hicks, Eva Nimmer, Jonathan Smoots, Josh Krause, David Ceccarini & Mark Ulrich in *EQUIVOCATION*

A DOOR OPENS, continued

love a lost son. It's no surprise that under Edward Morgan's steady direction, the story was crystal clear and heartfelt, aided further by Tami Workentin's lovely work as the deeply-dedicated social worker who cleared the path for redemption.

TO THE BRINK

And since we've happened upon *KING LEAR*, who can forget Jonathan Smoots' diaper-clad tragedian Richard Burbage, as the famous actor wrestling with Shakespeare's most advanced work, in the opening moments of *EQUIVOCATION*? Bill Cain's monumental story of playwrights and political intrigue had the potential to push us actors over the edge, but thanks to director Michael Cotey's cool hand on the tiller, our six-person troupe was able to master its character quick-switching and technical complexities. That left us free to explore Cain's rich and roiling seascape of ideas and adventures, filled with high stakes, higher hopes, and an unabashed love for humanity. True, we had Mr. Shakespeare (Shag) onstage, and yet, this play's bold, passionate voice rang out with relevance and clarity in the world we inhabit today.

The season ended with another trip to the land of Gunderson, with Lauren's intimate portrayal of two teenagers coming to terms with love, life and death. *I AND YOU* packed a surprise ending so astonishing and deeply poignant that we gave out special buttons reminding everyone to not give the secret away. Cristina Panfilio returned (from last year's *THE OTHER PLACE*), completely inhabiting the precocious and conflicted Caroline. Newcomer Ibraheem Farmer provided a convincingly calm, thoughtful counter-balance to Caroline's volatile ebullience, but also brought strength enough to accomplish his goal: mutual acceptance. Gunderson's metaphorical transplant was a masterstroke of storytelling, with an effect deeply felt and often registered by a collective gasp.

CHANGE

It's good to take a brief pause to appreciate a season well-rendered and received, but the nature of the work at Next Act is change. We very rarely repeat ourselves - the 2018-19 season will bring four new plays, each one unique and captivating in its own right. However, you will see many recognizable artists onstage, including Deborah Staples, Carrie Hitchcock and James Pickering - even yours truly. Director Edward Morgan will return to stage *OUTSIDE MULLINGAR*, while Marti Gobel will wear the other guest-directing hat for *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*. Young Ibraheem will return in this show, joined by some exciting newcomers. And, we are pleased to welcome back the marvelous Linda Stephens, as she anchors the new Bill Cain play, *HOW TO WRITE A NEW BOOK FOR THE BIBLE*, in April, 2019.



Cristina Panfilio & Ibraheem Farmer in *I AND YOU*

This new season will be prepared and served with the same loving care, attention to detail and passion for truth-telling that has gone into each one of Next Act's 28 seasons. I invite you to jump onboard to join us for the 29th, and if you're already there, you've got plenty of time to encourage friends to come along. We will deliver what you've come to expect from Next Act: intimate, powerful, personal.

See you at the theatre.

DC

Season photos by Ross Zentner

Seven UPAF Rides, seven seasons, seven different stories.

I'm not quite sure what pushed me from being a UPAF Miller Lite Ride for the Arts "Honorary" rider to actually mounting my two-wheeler and putting rubber to the road, but I'm glad it happened.

Year one, 2012, brought much trepidation, strangely enough, given that my daughter Miranda and I were signed up for the relatively modest 25-mile route. I wasn't exactly a long-distance bike rider then, so that was new. Maybe I was concerned for my daughter, as well, wondering how an intrepid, I-think-I'm-tough-as-nails eight year old would manage the trip from downtown to Grant Park and back. There was the unknown weather factor: wind? rain? cold? heat? Then again, we were both quietly wondering about the big, mysterious, steel-beamed, concrete, arched structure spanning Milwaukee's harbor entrance: the "bridge to nowhere." Now a Milwaukee landmark, the bridge had languished unfinished for five years before finally being joined at both ends and dubbed in honor of one of our most illustrious mayors in the Socialist tradition, Daniel Webster Hoan.



Miranda Ceccarini getting ready to ride

This bridge had long been a standing joke, emblematic of a shortage of foresight, strategic thinking, funding and resolve. The Blues Brothers (Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi), perhaps, put the open-ended structure to its most practical use for the climax of the car chase in their crazy 70s film, when the bad guys - pursuing in their Ford Pinto station wagon -

flew off the unfinished end, then somehow, suddenly drifted down through *Chicago* skies to meet their demise in the broad-shouldered streets below. "Our Lady of Blessed Acceleration, don't fail me now" indeed: thanks for the memories, Elwood.

Back to 2018: UPAF creates a specially-designed Ride for the Arts t-shirt each year, and this summer's theme was "Own the Hoan." After six successful trips, our June 3rd scoot up the bridge proved fun and exhilarating, with no crashes of any kind and only 8th gear required to make the relatively gradual ascent. As she did last year with her buddy Jack, Miranda powered out ahead in an extended burst of teenage energy, waiting for Dad to



The Ceccarinis at the finish line

catch up on the other side. And, boy oh boy, that 2-mile decline after hitting the peak is a great deal of fun, reminiscent of boyhood coasting down long hills with the wind in my face, feet off the pedals, legs splayed out to the sides.

No doubt, many hundreds of UPAF riders have made The Ride for the Arts part of their yearly cycle for decades. Whether their tradition is fueled by a desire to specifically support Milwaukee's bountiful arts community or just charity rides in general, we artists are thankful for their dedication. And more recently, what was a novelty for the Ceccarinis seven years ago has grown into our young tradition, including both daughters, wife Deborah and family friends The Raymonds. And through traditions, we mark changes, measure progress, feel the passing of time. The Hoan remains unaltered (OK, yes, there was the Herculean repair effort a few years ago, thank goodness), but it reminds me that legs get older, daughters grow up, and nothing that really counts stays the same for long. It's up to us to own what's best in our lives, with conscious care and lasting love.

Thank you, Riders for the Arts and the donors who support your efforts.

- David Ceccarini



“[Next Actors] taught me the value of listening and compromise.” This is just one of the amazing lessons Next Actors Summer Theatre for Teens offers each year.

This summer we have seven students from Franklin, Greendale, Ronald Reagan IB and West Allis Central High Schools. Two weeks ago, these teens came under the direction of professional teaching artist Grace DeWolff.

A teaching artist for over six years, Grace's goal for Next Actors is to “foster a community of teens where they not only feel accepted and understood, but feel free to share their ideas, opinions, creativity and hard work with each other in an environment that celebrates the things that make them unique.”

In just a few weeks, Next Actors will take their show on the road, performing their production for area senior centers and community organizations, including Daniels-Mardak Boys & Girls Club, First Stage Academy, Fitzsimonds Boys & Girls Club, Interfaith Senior Centers, St. Anne's Salvatorian Campus and St. John's on the Lake. According to Grace, the objective of the tour is two-fold. “Audiences get to feel the pulse of what's important to young people today while being entertained, and students travel to different communities they may not have experience with and experiment with the question, ‘Does my art speak to everyone?’”

Next Actors finishes their six-week intensive at our theatre on Saturday, July 21, at 4:30 PM as they share their creation with family, friends, and you, the Next Act Community. Please join us to support and congratulate the Next Actors on their hard work and amazing accomplishment.

2018 Next Actors

- Alex Cybela - West Allis Central graduate
- Olivia Gannaway - Greendale High School
- Paiton Graham - Ronald Reagan IB High School
- Samantha Hantsche - Ronald Reagan IB High School
- Emma Ilecki - Ronald Reagan IB High School
- Stephanie Perez Villafuerte - Ronald Reagan IB High School
- Gavin Portillo - Franklin High School



Photo: Timothy Moder

2018 Next Actors Sponsors

- Bader Philanthropies • Miles and Barbara Capron • Greater Milwaukee Association of Realtors Youth Foundation, Inc. • Greater Milwaukee Foundation's Werner M. & Susan M. Krause Family Fund
- Gordana & Milan Racic • UPAF • Wisconsin Arts Board



Photo: Timothy Moder

2018 Next Actors Tour (Free Public Performances)

- Monday, July 16 | 10:00 AM • Clinton & Bernice Rose Center
3045 N Martin Luther King Jr Dr
- Tuesday, July 17 | 10:00 AM • Washington Park Senior Center
4220 W Vliet St
- Wednesday, July 18 | 12:00 PM • Kelly Senior Center
6100 S Lake Dr
- Thursday, July 19 | 1:00 PM • Wilson Park Senior Center
2601 W Howard Ave

Benefit Performance

Saturday, July 21, 2018 | 4:30 PM
\$6 in advance | \$8 at the door
414-278-0765 | www.nextact.org

Have you ever wondered if the Next Actors program has an effect on students after they graduate from high school? We did, so we tracked down a few and asked them. One former Next Actor told us that he chose his career path based on his experience in the program. He explained, “This program teaches confidence, trust and understanding... It is this basic, human interaction that allows students to break down barriers that they once perceived as unachievable.” Another said, “Having Next Actors on my resume has helped me land jobs both in and outside the arts...I wouldn't trade those summers for anything.”

One alumna's story has a thread woven right through our theatre. Here's what she had to say.



Lisa Marie Gatewood

To some, **Next Actors: Summer Theatre for Teens** may seem like any number of other summer theatre programs: a group of teens getting together to put on a show during the months away from school. The advantages may seem standard: a structured day that gives area teens an activity that keeps them off the

streets, off the couch and out of trouble. As a former Next Actor, I can tell you that my experience was so much more than that.

When I joined the Next Actors program, I thought I wanted to be an actor. However, throughout that first summer, I discovered and cultivated my love of writing. While writing scenes in the group, both my fellow cast-mates and the instructors encouraged me to continue exploring my talent. That supportive atmosphere in the Next Actors program created a safe environment for me to develop my newfound passion.

Next Actors stands out because it provides a platform and a voice to the students...

Many factors make Next Actors unique. First, students do not have to pay tuition. Offering a free program ensures that no one is kept from participating due to an inability to pay. Generous donations from the community help keep Next Actors free while still attracting top theatre artists as instructors. As a kid from a single parent home, the cost of other theatre programs in town prevented me from participating. When I discovered Next Actors, it finally gave me an option to get involved and grow my love of performing.

Finally, Next Actors opens doors for participating teens. Because the program's creative process is collaborative, the theatre professionals that oversee and guide the process are more than just instructors – they become the students' colleagues as well. In my case, Next Actors led to a career in the arts. During my time as a Next Actor, I was asked to write a newsletter article about the program. For a couple of weeks, every day after the program, I would work on the article in the office. This was my first exposure to the administrative world of theatre. Those weeks led to a part time job in the box office, which led to assisting in marketing, a few seasons as wardrobe manager and as the Development Director during the capital campaign. I even took over as the play-writing coach for Next Actors for a couple of summers. None of that would've been possible without my first summer as a Next Actor. Milwaukee is so fortunate to have this long standing program, and it is my hope that it will continue for years to come.

- Lisa Marie Gatewood

Next Actors depends solely on ticket sales and donations from patrons like you to allow us to offer it to our students at no cost. Thank you to everyone who contributed. We asked our 2017 Next Actors to tell us how the program affected them and why your donations are important. Here are some of their responses.

Next Actors “provides a broad learning experience for all without having to worry about a budget.”

“It's truly amazing and teaches us about self discipline.”

“Next Act changed my life.”

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.



Tamarind Tribal Belly Dance presents 10TH ANNIVERSARY TRIBAL UNION

Join Tamarind Tribal Belly Dance for an amazing weekend of Belly Dance! Tiana Frolkina and Tinka will be headlining this action-packed weekend. Direct from Russia, Tiana is a sought after teacher in Europe for both her amazing fusion and ATS skills. Tinka is a pistol who can bookworm with the best of them. For both of them, this will be their first time teaching in America!

August 10 - 11. Tickets \$15 - \$20.

Synapse Publishing & Entertainment, LLC presents ANDREW SALGADO'S 2018 ESCAPE TOUR



Andrew is a Nashville based recording artist, originally hailing from Chicago. He is the 2013 Pepsi Southern Original Gulf Coast Jam winner, and an original songwriter/singer/guitarist who just released his second album titled *86-VOL 1* following his successful debut album *Absolutely Everything*.

Andrew is currently featured on the PBS *Special Songs at the Center*, airing nationally, and has been featured

extensively on WGN, ABC, and NBC. Andrew has co-written or performed with Carrie Underwood, Toby Keith, Darryl Worley, Clint Black, Brian Wilson/Kacey Musgraves, Jim Peterik and others, and his first video single (*Dance On*) has over 300K views.

Friday, August 31. Tickets \$20 in advance / \$25 at the door.



All In Productions presents HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

This groundbreaking Obie-winning Off-Broadway smash tells the story of "internationally ignored song stylist" Hedwig Schmidt, a fourth-wall smashing East German rock 'n' roll goddess who also happens to be the victim of a botched sex-change operation. It's a rocking ride, funny, touching, and ultimately inspiring to anyone who has felt life gave them an inch when they deserved a mile.

September 6 - 15. Tickets \$15 - \$25

For more information on these events and other upcoming rentals, visit www.nextact.org. Purchase tickets online at www.nextact.org, by phone at 414-278-0765 or in person at 255 S. Water Street.

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WHAT'S NEXT

is a quarterly publication of Next Act Theatre
255 S. Water Street • PO Box 394
Milwaukee, WI 53201 • 414-278-7780
www.nextact.org • email info@nextact.org
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In Memory of Gordana Racic, NAT Board Member and so much more

With a ready smile, bubbling enthusiasm and a lust for learning and life, Gordana Racic charmed me right away when I came to work at Next Act. As a Board Member and life-long fan of theatre, she was an influential voice with a seasoned perspective, who would demand my close attention. I soon learned that she and husband Milan were also long term, major supporters of Next Act. Little did I know, their appreciation for theatre ran so deeply.

I enjoyed many a visit with Gordana and Milan in their Fox Point home, full of captivating stories, admiring art, talking philosophy, history, cooking, music and, of course, theatre. Enchanting visions of grandly appointed European theatres and performance halls fill my head when I think of the many dozens of plays and performances they must have seen in 1950s Yugoslavia. Milan was surely a fixture in the audience - perhaps that kept him from the various kinds of mischief a teenager can get up to! Either way, Gordana and Milan's abiding passion for theatre was formed early on.



Milan & Gordana Racic

with the loss of her spark in the world, imagine the void felt by so many who knew her far longer and more deeply than I. We share sympathy with everyone who grieves Gordana's passing, and especially Milan. With open doors and open arms, we are with you every step; you are not without friends.



A Belgrade wedding, ca. 1957

By the time this is published, we at Next Act will have had the honor of hosting a celebration of Gordana's life, right here in the theatre, surrounded by people whose lives she touched indelibly. With sadness for the loss, joy for treasured memories, and profound gratitude for her leadership and staunch support of Next Act and many other causes, we say goodbye to our cherished friend, Gordana. The legacy of her inquisitive nature and positive outlook is a model we can all stand to follow and grow with. Peace go with you, dear friend.

During visits, I was regularly tested by Milan's good-humored teasing; I always gave it right back to him and we all shared a laugh. Every time I left their home, my purse was heavier than when I had arrived, laden with fresh fruit that Milan had secretly deposited when I wasn't looking.

I admired these two people enormously; truly partners, bound by an impressively long and loving commitment of 61 years. That they were donors to the theatre I work for became not unimportant - nor insignificant - but rather, simply not the reason I was driven to pay visits. I had gained two lovely, fascinating and fun friends with whom I wanted to spend time for the sheer enjoyment.

Gordana left this life on May 12, having lived fully, beautifully and generously. If my heart is heavy

Memorial donations may be directed to the Milwaukee Zoological Society and/or Next Act Theatre.



Photo: Timothy Moder



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Next Actors Benefit Performance • Saturday, July 21, 2018 | 4:30 PM

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Photo: Timothy Moder

Theatre by and about teenagers