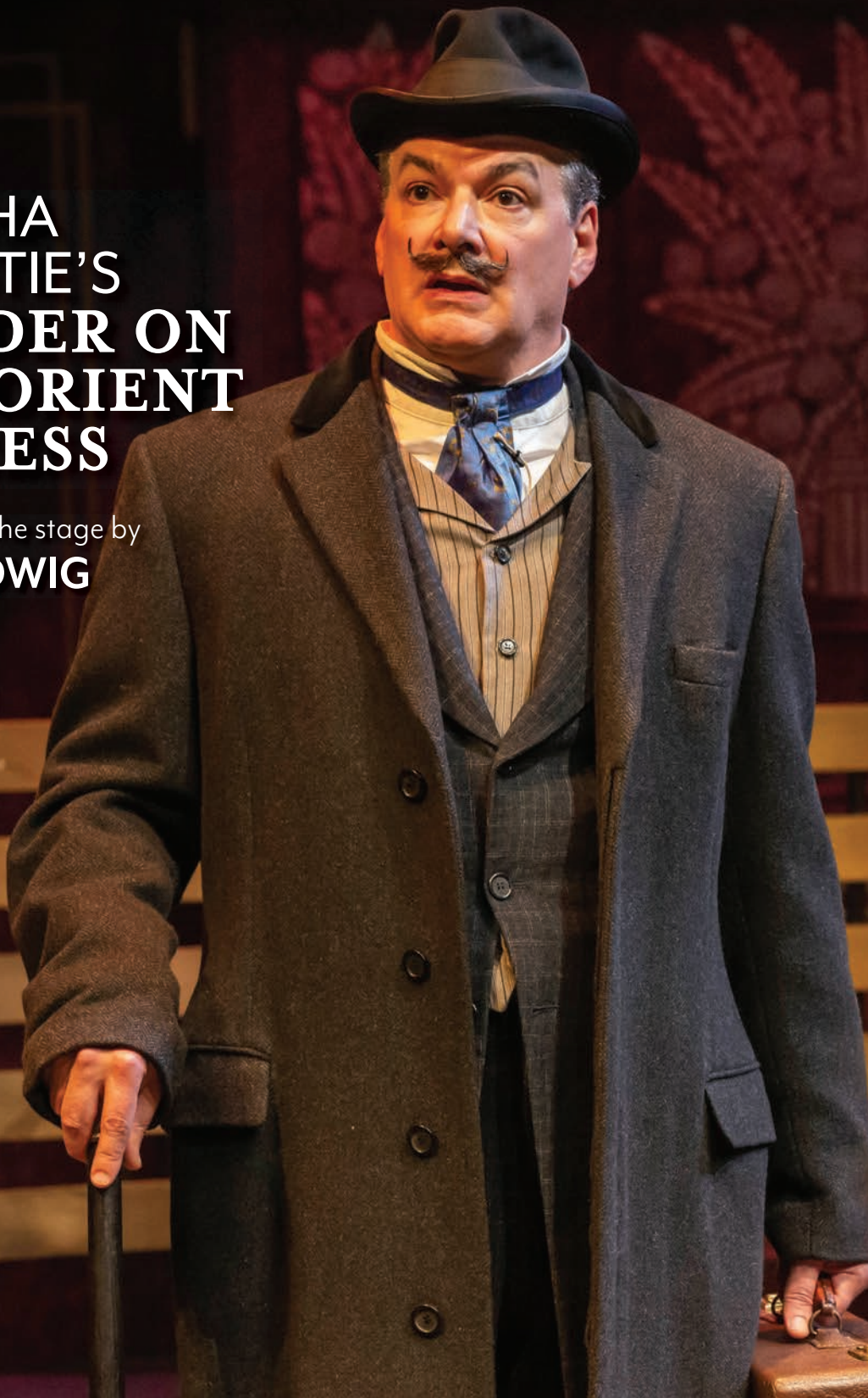


PROLOGUE

FALL 2022

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Adapted for the stage by
KEN LUDWIG



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ABOUT PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE is the pre-show publication of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. It is published as a service to Playhouse season subscribers, donors and others.

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2022-23 Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre
Season presented by



2022-23 Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre Season presented by
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Cover photo of Andrew May as Hercule Poirot from the Indiana Repertory Theatre 2020 production of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* by Zach Rosing.

WELCOME TO THE 2022-23 SEASON!



Photo of Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison
by Claudia Hershner.

Eight mainstage shows, including two world premieres and an exclusive London engagement. Interactive, theatrical social events. The grand opening of an all-new, 21st-century theatre complex. There is so much to look forward to this season! Welcome back to your Playhouse.

We're returning in a rather unique way by presenting our fall shows at partner theatres throughout the Greater

Cincinnati region. As we put the finishing touches on the Playhouse's Mainstage Theatre Complex, featuring Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre, we'll be performing at the Jarson-Kaplan Theater at Aronoff Center for the Arts, The Carnegie Theatre in Covington and Warsaw-Federal Incline Theater in Price Hill. You can read all about the shows and the artists behind them in this issue.

We're also bringing you more immersive social events this fall through our Off the Grid series. We invite you to help us solve another haunting mystery at Burger Farm and Garden Center and to ring in the holidays with some of our favorite characters from *A Christmas Carol* at Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig's Holiday Party at The Phoenix.

I can't think of a better way to embrace our community roots than to bring these wildly entertaining experiences to different pockets of our city. Altogether, they set the stage for the grand opening season of the Rouse Theatre, coming in March 2023. You can expect incredible theatrical artistry made even more magical by enhanced technology, all-new seating, an all-new stage, greater accessibility and a community gathering space that will nurture Cincinnati's very own artists and organizations. And it's not too late to help us accomplish this remarkable feat! Visit cincyplay.com today to make a gift.

Your Playhouse is entering a truly exciting new era. It's an event that happens only once in a generation. How lucky we are to be experiencing it together.

Blake Robison

Producing Artistic Director

STAY CONNECTED!



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OFF THE HILL TOURING PLAYS

FINDING BEAUTY IN UNLIKELY PLACES

By Deja Shanks

A charming and poetic adaptation of *The Little Prince* opens the 2022-23 Off the Hill season. Written by Rick Cummins and John Scoullar, this classic fairy tale finds a deserted aviator crossing paths with a young drifter who instills in him life-changing lessons. Audiences of all ages are sure to take the drifter's sentiments to heart, too!

Originally created by real-life aviator and French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* is a tale about the contrasts between a child's exploration of the wonders of the world and a grown-up's perspective after a lifetime of experiences and lessons. Cummins and Scoullar's adaptation remains true to the memorable story, infusing different existential gems that revolve around imagination, curiosity, wisdom and love. Piper N. Davis directs the production.

"In the story of *The Little Prince*, we're invited to see the beauty in people and in life by taking the time to look deeper than the surface," says Davis. "I'm excited about and looking forward to taking in those moments, helping the actors embody them and sharing them with children and their families."

The heart of the story lies in the influence the ethereal little prince has on the beleaguered aviator. Early in the story, the aviator recalls a time when he was a young boy and he drew a picture of an animal. He showed his picture to the grown-ups, who lacked imagination and responded with disdain. The aviator decided then that he'd never draw again, and he pursued aviation. Later in the story, his plan crashes and he's awakened by a mysterious young boy who introduces himself as the little prince. The boy immediately requests that the aviator draw him a picture of a sheep. The aviator obliges, returning to his prior love of creating art, and all the while, the little prince shares his experiences with life beyond the stars and the beings that await further into the galaxy.

"As the aviator listens to the little prince's stories and embraces his wisdom, our audiences will get the chance to do the same. They'll explore themes of friendships and relationships in a way so that everyone — young and seasoned — can open their minds and spirits to all there is in our great universe," says Davis.



Like many classic childhood stories, *The Little Prince* features encounters with unlikely characters in unlikely places. Along the little prince's journey across the galaxy, he meets a fox that wants to be tamed, a lamplighter consumed in his "lighting" orders, a rose navigating what it means to love and many more surprising characters. Thoughtful and imaginative details like these are present throughout the story.

The Little Prince will be performed at various community centers from Nov. 4 to 13. It is recommended for ages 6 and up. To learn more, visit cincyplay.com.

Off the Hill is made possible with support from **THE ROBERT AND ADELE SCHIFF FAMILY FOUNDATION, MAXWELL C. WEAVER FOUNDATION** and **KEYBANK**. The Bruce E. Coyle Acting Intern Company is supported by **BETSY AND JERRY SHROAT**.

OFF THE GRID

Off the Grid creates immersive theatre experiences for today. With an innovative artistic approach, interactive performances take place in site-specific or social settings that reimagine the nature of theatrical storytelling.



CHILDREN OF THE CORN MAZE: IN SEARCH OF THE GREENVILLE GHOST

Written by Brant Russell

An Interactive Performance at Burger Farm and Garden Center | Friday and Saturday evenings, Oct. 7 to 30, 2022

The fields of Burger Farm and Garden Center still have many spooky tales to tell in this follow-up to 2020's *Children of the Corn Maze*. Teenagers keep disappearing after dark, leaving hardly any evidence in their wake. Could it be the Greenville Ghost, a monstrous menace of local lore? The Greenville City Council isn't taking the matter seriously, so it's up to us to form a search party! With touches of humor and mind-boggling twists, this real-time mystery unfolds as participants explore the farm's spooky fields, on the hunt for clues.

This all-new, immersive experience promises chilling stories and festive frights aplenty! These outdoor corn maze performances coincide with Burger Farm's annual Fall Fun Festival. In addition to the interactive experience in the corn maze, guests can enjoy a hot drink station, a bonfire pit and hay bales.



MR. AND MRS. FEZZIWIG'S HOLIDAY PARTY

The Phoenix | Dec. 14 to 18, 2022

You're invited to ring in the holiday season with Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig! Everyone's favorite hosts from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* invite you to this interactive, Victorian-era party featuring beverages, food and festive activities like parlor games, Victorian dances, a puppet show and more.

Additional support provided by
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Visuals by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Adapted for the stage by **KEN LUDWIG**

Directed by **RISA BRAININ**

Jarson-Kaplan Theater at the Aronoff Center for the Arts
SEPT. 25 – OCT. 23, 2022

ALL ABOARD! By Erica Reid



The Orient Express finally arrives in Cincinnati!

Author Agatha Christie is more than a household name — she is the best-selling novelist of all time, with only Shakespeare and the Bible outselling her work. Christie penned an astonishing 66 detective novels during her lifetime, and her accomplishments also include the longest running play in history, *The Mousetrap*. Through her incredible work, Christie gifted us unforgettable characters — such as the astoundingly clever Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, the star of no fewer than 33 of her whodunits. Poirot first appeared in the novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where Christie described him in this way: “The neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandified little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police.”

Audiences for the Playhouse's *Murder on the Orient Express* will have no trouble understanding why this fastidious detective continues to captivate Christie's readers. Thanks to a faithful adaptation by award-winning playwright Ken Ludwig, all of Poirot's charm and brilliance — as well as his fussiness and impatience — saturate the story.

At the beginning of *Murder on the Orient Express*, we find Poirot completely out of his element: He is about to enjoy a vacation. He has recently closed a major case, and before the next puzzle rears his head, Poirot is prepared to relax. He is content to enjoy his trip by train from Istanbul to Western Europe, and he will certainly not be solving any mysteries on this trip. Of course, Christie has other plans for Poirot's time off. Once aboard the Orient Express, Poirot meets nine other passengers. They are mostly strangers to one another, all traveling for different reasons, but Poirot cannot help but notice little...well, clues.

Poirot does his best to resist the temptation to get involved — until, of course, a passenger is murdered. As he questions his fellow travelers, fewer and fewer clues seem to add up. Playhouse audiences will find themselves guessing right alongside Poirot, but *Murder on the Orient Express* keeps all but the shrewd detective — and the guilty party — guessing until the very end.

Audiences can also look forward to the way this production of *Murder on the Orient Express* brings the legendary train itself to the stage. The character

Monsieur Bouc, who runs the train company, describes the Orient beautifully: “It is not a mere train that will carry you tonight, it is a legend. It runs like no other vehicle on the earth... The best food, the best beds, the best pillows, the best feathers inside the pillows. It is poetry on wheels, and Lord Byron himself could not write it better.”

Director Risa Brainin is not intimidated by the demands of this staging. “Our wonderful set designer Rob Koharchik has created a ‘theatrical’ replica of the train,” she explains. “I use ‘theatrical’ because the elements of the train are taken directly from the original Orient Express. However, as the play will unfold on a proscenium stage, we had to be creative with how those elements are presented. I love how Rob has chosen to include certain architectural features in the design. Look for the beautiful art deco details — especially in the interior of the train.”

Brainin continues, “We also augment the scenery with our musical soundscape by the brilliant composer Michael Keck. In addition to the literal sounds and sensation of the moving train, this element creates the emotional landscape of the play, landing us in the time period and individual locations, and offering subtle insights into the individual characters and situation. It isn't always obvious to the audience, but sound and music are powerful storytelling tools. In this piece, sound can lead (or even mislead) the audience as they try to unravel the mystery with Poirot.”

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* brings together this luxurious setting, one of literature's most famous detectives, an unpredictable cast of characters and a mystery full of twists and turns to create a suspenseful and exciting evening of theatre that will keep each audience member holding their breath.

Poirot himself puts it best. “Good evening,” he smiles from under his famous mustache. “The story you are about to witness is one of romance and tragedy, primal murder and the urge for revenge. What better way to spend a pleasant evening together?”

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RUNNING TIME

An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Sept. 25.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is suitable for ages 12 and up with minimal adult language. This classic literary mystery is full of dramatic plot twists and multiple acts of violence — like murder (obviously).

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S MASTERPIECE

By Erica Reid



Risa Brainin

Risa Brainin reveals behind-the-scenes peeks at directing Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time. Why do you imagine the mystery genre so captivates readers (and audiences)?

Who doesn't love a good mystery? There is something so satisfying about solving a mystery, right? It is fun, it is challenging, and when you reach the end, you feel a sense of accomplishment.

I read an article by Elizabeth Nunes titled, "Why is the Mystery Genre So Appealing?" Nunes said, "The intrigue that gently ensnares you in the first few chapters morphs into the kind of suspense that leaves you clutching the book while you lean over its pages, as if the closer you get to the words, the quicker you can move the story along. It seems like it's taken eons to get to the end of the book; the stress has taken years off your life. You may never solve it at this rate. And then, all of a sudden, the answers are there and the

book has ended. You glance around, dazed, surprised the outside world is still the same, what with the huge plot twist you now know. You realize you've been holding your breath. Your mind has been blown. Who could resist coming back for more?"

I love that description. We want the play to feel as if you were reading the novel for the first time.

Theatregoers may have experienced other adaptations of Christie's novels, such as *And Then There Were None* and *The Mousetrap*. In your opinion, what makes *Murder on the Orient Express* stand apart? Are there "classic Christie" elements that audiences can look forward to?

All of the Christie elements are there in this adaptation. Poirot is in rare form, as per usual. He has a foil in the character of Monsieur Bouc, who runs the Wagon Lit. Clues are dropped and picked up. Bouc, like the popular Christie character Hastings, tries to put the pieces together...without success. Poirot solves the mystery with brilliance, just like always! Classic Christie for sure.

Playwright Ken Ludwig's adaptation is fast-paced and clever. As an accomplished director, is there anything you specifically appreciate about Ludwig's script?

I think Ludwig's adaptation is masterful. I find it so interesting that the book was published in 1934, adapted into three radio

plays (1966, 1992 and 2017), two films 40 years apart (1974 and 2017), three television programs including a Japanese version in 2015 and one lone play by Ludwig which premiered in 2017. Why didn't anyone take a crack at adapting it before now? Let's see: 13 characters, set in a restaurant in Istanbul, on a train platform, in three different compartments, a corridor and a dining car on the stunning Orient Express may have been daunting to some...but not Ken Ludwig.

I remember seeing the first film and absolutely loving it. What I admired most were the rich, colorful characters played by so many great stars of the day: Albert Finney (in an incredible, over-the-top, scenery-chewing performance), Lauren Bacall, Vanessa Redgrave, Sean Connery and more — the cast was a wow. Christie wrote fabulous roles, and Ludwig's version exploits, expands, delights in those wonderful renderings. He has remained true to the original when it comes to portraying these delightfully complex, dramatic and quirky individuals. I really appreciate the delicate tone of the adaptation.



Photo of Jennifer Joplin.



Photo of Jennifer Joplin, Katie Bradley and Andrew May with Rob Johansen.



Photo of Andrew May and Katie Bradley.

Photos on pages four and five from the Indiana Repertory Theatre 2020 production of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* by Zach Rosing.

FRIDA... A SELF PORTRAIT

Written and Performed by **VANESSA SEVERO**

Directed by **JOANIE SCHULTZ**

The Carnegie Theatre, Covington, Ky.

OCT. 15 – NOV. 6, 2022

FINDING FRIDA KAHLO

By Tatiana Godfrey



What do you know about Frida Kahlo? Maybe your first thought is of her signature unibrow or her husband and painter Diego Rivera or maybe of her self-portrait with a monkey. Today, her paintings and likeness can be found on calendars, posters, sneakers, postage stamps and many other household items. A movie, an opera and numerous books have been written about her life. An immersive Kahlo exhibit has opened in cities around North America, and a musical about Frida is expected to open on Broadway in 2024.

Because of Kahlo's popularity in contemporary culture, for many of us our entry into Kahlo's life and work is through those who are inspired by her. Vanessa Severo, playwright and star of the Playhouse's production of *Frida...A Self Portrait*, found her own entry into Kahlo's life. About seven years ago, Severo and an old friend of hers were chatting over coffee. The old friend told her he saw Kahlo in her. That comment inspired the stunningly creative, one-woman production that Playhouse audiences will see this fall at The Carnegie Theatre in Covington.

Severo started with research on the iconic Mexican painter. "I found this woman that was very ahead of her time — and very tweetable, actually, for today — and kind of the first selfies I would say of the 1930s and '40s. But the difference was that in today's world, we try to put on a patina of 'everything's great,' and here's this woman who's painting her pain very clearly and unapologetically, and I thought, I wanted her to be alive and breathing today," Severo said in an interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting.

The first draft of the play focused only on Kahlo. Severo took six different instances of tragedy from Kahlo's life and explored how she conquered these

tragedies through her art. The first draft was performed at The Living Room Theatre in Kansas City, but Severo felt it was still unfinished. She says, "I wanted to know how Frida Kahlo lived, what the streets smelled like, the footsteps she took on the streets and what her community thought of her, and I wanted to be in her house."

After receiving a grant, Severo traveled to Casa Azul in Mexico City, Kahlo's house and now museum. What Severo learned there changed the nature of the play completely. She says, "I realized I couldn't tell Frida's story without telling my own. So the difference [between the first draft and this production] is that, it didn't just become 'Frida: A Self Portrait,' it became 'Vanessa: A Self Portrait' and this heart string that we share, attached to each other."

Severo's expertise as an actor, writer, dancer and choreographer are all on display in *Frida...A Self Portrait*. Although Kahlo is the main character of the play, Severo deftly portrays many characters, from Rivera to Frida's parents and sister. The play is written as an interview with Kahlo (Severo also plays the interviewer) and beautifully incorporates movement, monologue, and Kahlo and Severo's life stories into one cohesive piece.

Playhouse Associate Artistic Director Joanie Schultz directed the world premiere of the new draft at Kansas City Repertory Theatre and at Portland Center Stage. She will be directing the Playhouse's production as well. She says of *Frida...A Self Portrait*, "What we are left with is pure Frida and pure Vanessa: searching to be seen and understood and reaching a hand out to all the other 'strange' people in the world through their honest expression of self."



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RUNNING TIME

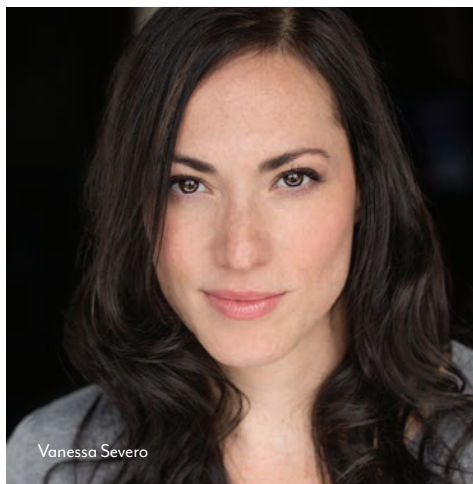
An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Oct. 15.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Frida...A Self Portrait is suitable for ages 12 and up. Frida Kahlo boldly captured the details of her life through her art, and so this play includes discussions of adult relationships, illness and other mature themes.

CREATING A SELF-PORTRAIT

By Tatiana Godfrey



Playwright and performer Vanessa Severo gives us a closer look into her play *Frida...A Self Portrait*, which is directed by Playhouse Associate Artistic Director Joanie Schultz.

Could you tell us about the concept of self-portraiture and how it is present in *Frida...A Self Portrait*?

I love this question. The concept of self-portraiture is such a tricky and blurred presentation today. In a world of selfies, filters and displaying our “best lives” on social media, we have lost the concept of what real expression is. In looking at Frida Kahlo’s self portraits, we find a woman unapologetically showing her pain and her current state of being. It can be uncomfortable and also unnerving for the viewer, yet on the other hand, we see something in ourselves relating to her state of being. When I decided to write *Frida...A Self Portrait*, I found that I could not just tell her story without telling my own. I had to present my own self portrait in order to honestly connect with hers.

How and when in the process of creating this piece did Joanie become involved?

The play was 46 minutes in length, and it followed six events of Frida Kahlo’s life. Events I considered to be tragedies, in which she rose above. I performed the production nine times and then tucked it away for later. I felt a strong need to further explore the piece. I applied for the Fox Fellowship Theatre Communications Group grant and received it. With the help from TCG I was able to really immerse myself into Frida’s life by staying in Mexico City, staying at Casa Azul and really living, breathing and existing in Frida’s world. When I returned from that immersive experience, the play had shifted. I knew things about Frida that the internet could not provide.

I was asked by Kansas City Repertory Theatre to produce the play in their 2019

season, and when asked whom I would like to direct, I had no other choice in mind. I gave the script to Joanie Schultz, and she agreed to direct the production. Joanie asked me a question that changed the entire landscape of the play. She asked, “Who is Frida talking to?” From that moment on, the play transformed quickly. The production is what it is today because of Joanie’s insight and grace, and of direction so clear, it could be written on paper.

You’re a dancer, and the play is as much a movement piece as it is a textual piece. Can you tell me about your process for finding the movement in the play?

Dance and movement speak to all of us in a universal language. There are things in Frida’s life I found far too painful to express in words. When I reached those moments, I turned to movement. The movement became a bridge of expression I could communicate most clearly because sometimes no words can suffice.

What do you think Playhouse audiences should know before sitting down to watch?

I would love for audiences to walk in knowing that theatre is made in the simplest of forms. The story and the audience. We come to theatre to see the truth about ourselves, and I believe Frida shared her truth so that we may be able to connect to our own.

What do you hope audiences will take away about Frida from your play?

If audiences can walk away by feeling empowered by their differences and “strangeness,” then I will have done my job.



Production photos on pages six and seven of Vanessa Severo in the Portland Center Stage 2021 production of *Frida...A Self Portrait* by Owen Carey.

THE LION

By **BENJAMIN SCHEUER**

Directed by **SEAN DANIELS**
and **ALEX STENHOUSE**

Warsaw Federal Incline Theater
NOV. 12 – DEC. 4, 2022

DIRECT FROM LONDON

By Natalie Clare



How do you weather the storm? That question underscores the story and lyrics of *The Lion* — a solo musical told through monologues and modern folk music. The emotionally stirring tale follows one man's journey through love, loss and the redemptive power of music. After performing in London last summer, *The Lion* arrives in Cincinnati for an exclusive Playhouse engagement at Warsaw Federal Incline Theater in Price Hill.

Intimately told by a single performer, *The Lion* introduces a character named Benjamin who shares with the audience the turbulent story of his family. Chapters begin with his childhood, which is largely defined by his father's love of music and penchant for writing folk songs. In one of the show's first numbers, he describes how his father builds him a banjo made of a cookie tin, rubber bands and a necktie. He sings, "When he plays his old guitar I play my cookie-tin banjo, I play my cookie-tin banjo right along with him."

It's not long, however, before Benjamin's life takes a drastic turn. An unexpected event sends shock waves throughout the family, splintering Benjamin's relationship with them for years to come. When he experiences a brush with his own mortality, Benjamin must summon the courage to weather the storm.

The Lion premiered off-Broadway in 2014 and toured the U.S. and the U.K. until 2017. Benjamin Scheuer, the composer and playwright whose own life inspired the production, took the stage as the solo musical's performer. The production was hailed as "wondrous" by *San Francisco Gate*. *The Huffington Post* wrote, "Spellbinding! See it now. See it again. The best musical I've seen this year!"

The original production of *The Lion* was directed by Sean Daniels, who helms the Playhouse's production alongside co-director Alex Stenhouse. It marks the musical's first revival, with Max Alexander-Taylor stepping into the role of Benjamin. Stenhouse describes the overall feel of the production as warm and accepting as it revels in a communal, live experience.

"Unusually for a musical, this piece has a real intimacy and directness with an audience, and we've directed the show to be far more live and

spontaneous than is often possible to be with a large ensemble or orchestra — particularly as the acting and singing is performed by the same person who plays the music," Stenhouse says. "*The Lion* is an exciting example that musicals can be small, subtle, sincere and stripped right back to just a person in a room telling a brilliant story."

Last summer, the production performed at Southwark Playhouse in London, and like the premiere, critics were quick to sing their praises. *WhatsOnStage* called it "an incredibly life-affirming theatrical experience." *Shenton Stage* wrote, "It is simply a gorgeous piece of writing and sublime theatre making that is now the revival of the year."

"The reviews were some of the best we've ever had in our careers... That's been such a joy," Stenhouse says. He adds, "It began with a conversation between me and Benjamin Scheuer back in 2019 in London, and to be bringing our production to Cincinnati this year is so surreal and a truly special experience. We're so proud of it, and we can't wait for you all to see what we've been cooking up across the pond."

Alexander-Taylor says the reactions from critics and audience members have been stronger and more consistent than he could have ever hoped.

"Everyone feels like they have a connection to the show," says Alexander-Taylor. "Many have talked about how they have come out the other side feeling they've learned something new about life and themselves. Many who have suffered similarly to the character Ben have talked of how it's helped them process their own experiences for the better. I'm hesitant to use the word 'healing,' but the more I perform the show, the more the word feels apt."

With original acoustic music and an unforgettable story that's as uplifting as it is heartrending, *The Lion* roars.

**"Musicals can be small,
subtle, sincere and stripped
right back to just a person in a
room telling a brilliant story."**

— Co-director Alex Stenhouse

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RUNNING TIME

An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Nov. 12.

CONTENT ADVISORY

The Lion is suitable for ages 12 and up. This heartrending yet uplifting story about one man's personal journey through loss, illness and relationship challenges includes mature themes and some amazing music. We recommend you bring tissues.

HEAR HIM ROAR

By Natalie Clare



Max Alexander-Taylor tells us about bringing his performance in *The Lion*, a one-man show, to Cincinnati at Warsaw Federal Incline Theater.

You performed this show at Southwark Playhouse in London last summer. Tell us about your experience in terms of audience response and performing live in such an intimate setting.

In musical theatre, the final collaborator is the audience, and none more so than in *The Lion*. The audience is an additional character, and with that comes a freshness every night. *The Lion* is a conversation piece but whilst the audience have no lines, they provide most of the energy in the room. The intimacy of the Southwark Playhouse amplifies this tenfold. I've never been in a show that is so reliant on an audience's attention. Thankfully, *The Lion* is written with such clarity and heart that the attention of the audience is never something I've had to worry about.

Before you began rehearsals, what was your initial response to the story?

I was blown away. I'm a bit of a writing nerd. I love structure and literary theory. Usually, I have my analysis brain on when first experiencing a piece of theatre. When I watched Benjamin's recorded version, the show totally bypassed that part of my brain. My response was pure catharsis. There were no emotions or questions left unexplored by the final note of the show. The themes covered are universal: grief, illness, love, family, community, healing, growth, home. Many shows try and fail to deal with these issues;



they either feel ham-fisted or incomplete. Upon rewatching numerous times could I really appreciate how the themes working within such a tight and complete structure provoked such a cathartic response.

Folks who have reviewed *The Lion* have written about the unique space it occupies in the world of musical theatre. How would you describe the genre of the show?

A good friend of mine, Adam Lenson, who is a writer and theatre director in London, talks with great clarity about defining musical theatre. Musical theatre is a medium and not a genre. Just as a play, ballet or painting is a medium, musical theatre is its own thing.

The Lion, structurally and in terms of content, is very much a musical. The songs feel like folk songs but function as musical theatre ones: They progress the narrative and take a character from one state to another, all while an audience is hoodwinked into thinking they're simply listening to a folk ballad. Like *Hamilton*, this musical uses a specific genre of music to defy an audience's expectations of what a musical should sound like.

The story of *The Lion* is deeply personal and biographical. As a performer, how did you approach the role? What helps you prepare for each performance?

Initially, I thought it couldn't be done. The show is so specific to Benjamin's story and personality that I thought it would be impossible for anyone to believe that I was Ben. It took a lot of convincing from director Alex Stenhouse that it could be done, and not only that, but having an actor play the role would really elevate the piece. I studied the role like I would any other. I tried to understand the character's motivations, intentions, relationships and conflicts.

The unique thing about my relationship with this show is that I don't feel the need to get in the zone. Many actors will psych themselves up before a performance and try to increase the amount of energy in their bodies through a series of exercises. I found that doing this really disconnects me from the audience and makes it feel more like a performance — this isn't the vibe we want to go for! My warm-up now is just heading into the auditorium, chatting with some members of the audience, tuning a few guitars and then very subtly starting the show. The transition feels seamless, and as such, the audience is lulled into the show without even knowing it has begun.

What is your favorite song to perform in the show?

Each song has been my favorite at one time — they're all such wonderful moments in different ways. At the moment, it's probably "Weather the Storm." Out of context, it's a lovely song that feels applicable to many situations. It's the "dad bestows wisdom" song of the show. In context, it's really quite heartbreaking and seems to be the first place where audience members tend to cry! In terms of staging, it's a really striking image that one can only appreciate at the theatre.

Photos on pages eight and nine of Max Alexander-Taylor in *The Lion* at Southwark Playhouse in London by Pamela Raith.

HOW FAR WE'VE COME

Construction of the Playhouse's Mainstage Theatre Complex in Eden Park began in 2019 when we renovated the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre. Preparatory site work began in 2020, and we broke ground in 2021 and made major structural progress to bring Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre to its feet. While performing our final show in the Marx in April and May 2022, we invited the Playhouse community to "make their mark on the Marx" before the theatre was torn down shortly afterward. Now, we're nearing completion of this once-in-a-generation project! See how far we've come, below, and read about the all-new features you can expect at cincyplay.com/support/a-new-stage.

CONSTRUCTION MILESTONES



2021



2022



COMING IN 2023



You can play a role in this once-in-a-generation moment! Visit cincyplay.com/support/a-new-stage today to make a gift and help usher in a new theatrical era!

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR SPRING 2023:

A conversation with Blake and Joanie

Last May, Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison and Associate Artistic Director Joanie Schultz engaged in conversation about a range of theatrical topics. The video, filmed by Optic Lizard Productions, premiered for a group of Playhouse donors. Of the many topics Robison and Schultz discussed, the 2022-23 season was one of them. Below, read about their takes on the shows they're directing.



The Singular Sensations present **A CHORUS LINE**

Conceived and Originally Directed and Choreographed by **MICHAEL BENNETT**
Book by **JAMES KIRKWOOD** and **NICOLAS DANTE**
Music by **MARVIN HAMLISCH**
Lyrics by **EDWARD KLEBAN**
Directed by **BLAKE ROBISON**

Celebrate the grand opening of Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre with the sensational, Tony Award-winning show about 17 dancers competing for a role in a new Broadway musical.

BLAKE: We started with this question: "What does it mean to look at these characters in an audition process, today?" The theatre is different today than it was in the '70s. People audition differently. Behavior that was overlooked in the '70s is no longer acceptable, nor should it be, in today's world. So, without changing the words and without changing the dialogue, how do we create the work from a contemporary vantage point? I'm excited to explore that with the designers and even in the casting of the actors. We don't want to copy what's been done before. We want to honor this classic musical even as we find a new way in.

JOANIE: It's going to be a great opportunity for these artists who are involved, too, being able to create that.

BLAKE: Absolutely. I mean, a lot of people have done *A Chorus Line*, but I don't think anybody has done it with the fresh eyes that we're trying to bring to it along the way.

JOANIE: How exciting, for a new theatre. So, it'll be different, even if you've seen *A Chorus Line* before.

ORIGIN STORY – WORLD PREMIERE!

By **NATHAN ALAN DAVIS**
Directed by **JOANIE SCHULTZ**

With delightfully unexpected turns and an ensemble of endearing characters, *Origin Story* is a world premiere comedy about life's biggest questions and the surprising ways we find the answers.

BLAKE: Is it fair to say that it's sort of a Gen-Z identity play? This young woman is trying to figure out the identity of who her parents are and that sort of thing.

JOANIE: They're not quite that young. She's in her 30s. I think that makes her a millennial. But, it's a very funny "lost in your early adulthood" play. I feel like there were a lot of movies out there for my generation. The Gen-Xers had many movies about people being lost and aimless in their 20s and 30s.

BLAKE: So, it's sort of that for a new generation of theatre-goers.

JOANIE: Yeah, in a way that is relevant to what that generation faces now.

SHANE – WORLD PREMIERE

By **KAREN ZACARIAS**
Directed by **BLAKE ROBISON**

One of the greatest Westerns of all time finds new life on the stage with a fresh perspective from acclaimed playwright Karen Zacarias.

JOANIE: It's going to be really interesting to see a Western onstage.

BLAKE: You don't see that very often! We used to say there are no sports plays, but there are now — *Take Me Out* is a great sports play and more recently, *The Great Leap* by Lauren Yee. But Westerns, you do not see Westerns onstage very much. We're not trying to put a Hollywood film onstage. We're trying to take the story and figure out how to theatricalize it — how to take a classic American genre and re-interrogate it from our contemporary vantage point. That's what leads to the diversification of the characters, giving them much more detailed backstories that are culturally authentic. It's going to be really fun and fascinating. Even if you don't love Westerns, it's a great family drama.

There are even more amazing stories to
look forward to in the spring!
Visit **cincyplay.com** for more details.

PLAY IN THE PARK
CINCINNATI HOUSE

PLAYHOUSE BOARD MEMBER HONORED WITH VOICES OF GIVING AWARD

By Lynn Smith



Barbara Weyand

The Playhouse is proud to honor Board Member Barbara Weyand, who received a 2022 Voices of Giving Award by the Greater Cincinnati Planned Giving Council last June. Voices of Giving is an annual event that recognizes philanthropists who have made a bequest or planned gift. The event celebrates the generous spirit of individuals who help ensure the long-term welfare of the many nonprofits which make our community artistically vibrant.

Barbara has been an essential part of the Playhouse leadership for multiple years, and we are grateful for all the ways she makes our work possible. In 2006, she committed to making a legacy gift to the Playhouse and became a member of the Morse Johnson Society. Morse Johnson, who served as Board President from 1960 to 1975, was instrumental in building the foundation of the Playhouse in its earliest days. Members of the Morse Johnson Society, where Barbara has played an active role, collectively ensure the future of the Playhouse for years to come. Barbara's legacy gift

reflects her dedication to our theatre and its mission to connect the community through the arts. She has ensured that the Playhouse will continue to grow, and that audiences will have the opportunity to experience the highest caliber of live theatre for years to come.

In addition to advocating for legacy giving in the community, Barbara has been a Playhouse Board Member for 17 years, is a founding member of the Leading Ladies program and has donated generously to the Directing the Future Capital Campaign. As a subscriber for 22 years, Barbara estimates she has seen close to 200 shows on Playhouse stages. She says it is "a privilege and an honor" to help ensure the Playhouse of the future.

Barbara's impact is felt by multiple organizations in Cincinnati. Her passions include the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati Ballet, Public Media Connect CET, ThinkTV, the Playhouse and the New Beginnings Program at Lighthouse Youth and Family Services.

Is the Playhouse one of YOUR favorite arts organizations? Have you left a gift to the Playhouse in your estate plan? Contact Major Gifts Officer Lynn Smith at **513-977-2067** to find out how you can become a member of the Morse Johnson Society.