



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**First Stage presents the
heartwarming holiday classic
A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS**

-A journey to discover the true meaning of Christmas-

Milwaukee, WI – November 3, 2021 – This holiday season brings the joyful return of First Stage’s production of Charles M. Schulz’s **A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS** to the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater. Based on the television special by **Bill Melendez** and **Lee Mendelson**, with stage adaptation by **Eric Schaeffer**, by special arrangement with **Arthur Whitelaw** and **Ruby Persson**, and directed by Artistic Director **Jeff Frank**, the play features an iconic score performed by Music Director/Pianist **Paul Helm** as well as 11 young performers in two different casts. As the beloved story goes: It’s Christmas time. Everyone in town is giddy with holiday cheer, but Charlie Brown has the Yuletide blues. He’s depressed with the commercialization of the season. Will directing the Christmas play help him get in the spirit of the season? Join Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the rest of the Peanuts gang as they learn the true meaning of Christmas. This is one holiday outing the entire family will treasure together! Sponsored by **Associated Bank, Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren**. *Performance runtime is approximately 60 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 4+.*

A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS runs **November 20 – December 26, 2021** at the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater, located at 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets start at \$24 and can be purchased in person at the Marcus Center Box Office at 929 N. Water Street, by phone at (414) 273-7206 or online at firststage.org.

“Charlie Brown is a study in perseverance and positivity,” shared Artistic Director/Director **Jeff Frank**. “No matter how many times Lucy pulls that football away, he has faith that one day he will boot that football through the uprights. No matter how many losses his team suffers on the baseball field, he remains hopeful that a victory awaits. All of us can identify with Charlie’s struggles. Life can be hard. We can lose our way and get discouraged. But this show reminds us that we are at our best when we come together, when we care for each other, when we take the time to really see each other. We all know it’s been a hard year and a half, and a time for reflection on what is meaningful in our lives. What better time to come back to an old friend like A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS, whose message is as relevant now as when it was written over 50 years ago?”

BIOGRAPHIES

Jeff Frank (Artistic Director/Director/Understudy for Mr. Backes) is recognized as one of the top directors in the field with an expertise in developing new work for theater for young audiences. He holds a BFA in Theater from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and an MFA in Child Drama from the University of Utah. Having served as First Stage’s Education and Academy Director from 1996 – 2003 and as First Stage’s Artistic Director since February 2003, Jeff remains committed to the power of theater to transform lives and is forever thankful to call First Stage home.

Paul Helm (Music Director/Pianist) is always grateful to be back at First Stage! Previous First Stage credits include BIG RIVER, CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG, JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH, BIG FISH, SEUSSICAL, U: BUG: ME!, MY SON PINOCCHIO, ALEXANDER . . . VERY BAD DAY, JUNIE B. JONES . . . MONKEY BUSINESS, THE HAPPY ELF, A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD and THE QUILTMAKER’S GIFT. Paul has performed, directed and music directed with the Utah Shakespeare Festival, Hippodrome Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre, freeFall Theatre Company, Sacramento Theatre Company, Arrow Rock Lyceum Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Fireside Dinner Theatre, Hope Summer Repertory Theatre and Bucknell University. Recent credits include MURDER FOR TWO, BRIGHT STAR, THE FANTASTICKS, SOUVENIR, CRAZY FOR YOU, THE COCOANUTS, SPRING AWAKENING, PUMP BOYS AND DINETTES, GUYS ON ICE and FOREVER PLAID. He was also a vocalist for DISNEY ON CLASSIC, a three-month symphony concert tour of Japan with the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra. paulhelm.net

ADULT CAST

J.T. Backes (Snoopy) is beyond thrilled to be returning to the Todd Wehr stage with First Stage (LOVABYE DRAGON, JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH, BIG FISH and RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL). Other favorite roles: Bingo Little in BY JEEVES (Windfall Theatre), Jon in TICK TICK BOOM (Lake Country Playhouse) and Dickon in THE SECRET GARDEN (Soulstice Theatre). J.T is the Academy Headmaster for First Stage Theater Academy and is a proud member of Actors’ Equity.

Jeff Schaetzke (Understudy for Mr. Helm/Director of Artistic Operations) has a long history at First Stage as a director, teacher, music director and actor, dating back to playing Romeo in 1996. Most recently, Jeff directed ELF – THE MUSICAL and the music for Roald Dahl’s MATILDA THE MUSICAL and THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER THE MUSICAL. Other First Stage favorites include THE MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF EDWARD TULANE, SPOOKLEY THE SQUARE PUMPKIN THE MUSICAL, LOVABYE DRAGON, RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL, ELLA ENCHANTED; BIG NATE: THE MUSICAL; BIG FISH (having also appeared as Edward Bloom); BIG, THE MUSICAL and many others. Jeff enjoys leading the Young Company trip to American Players Theatre; and he directed the Summer Academy’s Company Class production of LEGALLY BLONDE, JR. in 2019. A lifelong Milwaukeean, Jeff has enjoyed working with many Milwaukee theaters, including playing Father in Skylight Music Theatre’s production of VIOLET, and directing music for Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Skylight Music Theatre, Carroll University, UWM and Marquette University. Other credits: Milwaukee Chamber Theatre’s THE DALY NEWS, two seasons at American Players Theatre and a 22-year relationship at Dominican High School. Jeff is a 2014 inductee into the Wisconsin Theatre Directors Hall of Fame, and a 4-time Outstanding Musical Award Winner at the Overture Center’s TOMMY/JERRY Awards. He’s a proud graduate of North Central College and the Professional Theatre Training Program at UW-Milwaukee.

YOUNG PERFORMER CASTS

Young Performer roles are double cast. Young Performers in the Sparky Cast include: **Nolan Zeller Mayer** (Milwaukee) as Charlie Brown; **Thatcher Jacobs** (Fox Point) as Schroeder; **King Z. Pollard** (Milwaukee) as Linus; **Patrick Kanter** (Fox Point) as Shermmy; **Benjamin Poindexter** (Franklin) as Pig Pen; **Alice Rivera** (Milwaukee) as Lucy; **Lucy Halpern** (Whitefish Bay) as Violet; **Maura Kuhnen-Grooms** (Shorewood) as Sally; **Taylor Arnstein** (Fox Point) as Freida; **Lucia Harris** (Fox Point) as Patty and **Sharon Chumlea** (Cedarburg) as Skater.

Young Performers in the Schulz Cast include: **Edward Owczarski** (Milwaukee) as Charlie Brown; **Ben Nowacek** (Wauwatosa) as Schroeder; **William Swoboda** (Whitefish Bay) as Linus; **Collin Weise** (Wauwatosa) as Shermmy; **Layton Lal** (Whitefish Bay) as Pig Pen; **Ailie Snyder** (Milwaukee) as Lucy; **Abigail Montie** (New Berlin) as Violet; **Lauren DeGroot** (Menomonee Falls) as Sally; **Reese Bell** (Cedarburg) as Freida; **Sydney McElroy** (Milwaukee) as Patty and **Lauren Edwards** (Greenfield) as Skater.

The Artistic Staff for A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS includes: **Jeff Frank** (Artistic Director/Director); **Chris Feiereisen** (Choreographer); **Paul Helm**, Member of Actors’ Equity Association, (Music Director/Pianist); **Martin McClendon** (Scenic Designer); **Jason Orlenko**, USAA (Costume Designer); **Noele Stollmack** (Lighting Designer); **Melissa L. Wanke**, Member of Actors’ Equity Association, (Stage Manager) and **Carrie Johns** (Assistant Stage Manager).

Tickets start at \$24 – Tickets may be purchased at firststage.org or through the Marcus Center Box Office, in person at 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee or by phone (414) 273-7206 or toll free at (888) 612-3500. The number for TDD (for deaf and hard of hearing patrons)

is (414) 273-3080.

COVID Protocols: First Stage COVID safety protocols can be viewed here: [firststage.org/plan-your-visit/safety-security/ - performances](https://firststage.org/plan-your-visit/safety-security/-performances)

Special events for A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

Pay What You Choose Performance: Friday, November 26, 2021 at 7:00 p.m.

Pay What You Choose tickets are available on a first come, first served basis with a minimum suggested donation of \$5 per person. Doors open at 6:00 p.m. on the day of the performance. Patrons are encouraged to arrive early.

ASL Interpreted Performance: Sunday, December 19, 2021 at 4:00 p.m.

This performance will be sign language interpreted for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Assistive listening devices are also available at the Todd Wehr Theater.

Sensory Friendly Performance: Wednesday, December 1, 2021 at 7 p.m.

A Sensory Friendly Performance with accommodations for families with children on the autism spectrum will take place on Wednesday, December 1 at 7 p.m. Sensory accommodations include lower sound, house lights up, a quiet area staffed by an educator experienced with the care of students on the autism spectrum and other developmental differences, and more. Tickets for Sensory Friendly Performances are \$10. Order by phone at **(414) 267-2961**, weekdays 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. to reserve tickets. To learn more visit: firststage.org/plan-your-visit/sensory-friendly-performances/

FACT SHEET

About: A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

By Charles M. Schulz

Based on the television special by Bill Melendez and Lee Mendelson

Stage Adaptation by Eric Schaeffer

By Special Arrangement with Arthur Whitelaw and Ruby Persson

Directed by Jeff Frank

Sponsored by Associated Bank, Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren

Location: The Marcus Center's Todd Wehr Theater, 929 N. Water Street, Milwaukee

Live Performances: November 20 – December 26, 2021

Description: Come home for the holidays with First Stage and this treasured holiday classic. Everyone is giddy with Christmas cheer, but Charlie Brown has the Yuletide blues. Will directing the Christmas play help him get in the spirit of the season? Join Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the rest of the Peanuts gang as they learn the true meaning of Christmas. This is one holiday gift the

entire family will treasure. *Performance runtime is approximately 60 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 4+.*

Performances:

- Saturday, November 20 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, November 21 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Friday, November 26 at 4:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m. – *PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE PERFORMANCE AT 7:00 P.M.*
- Saturday, November 27 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, November 28 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Wednesday, December 1 at 7:00 p.m. – *SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE*
- Friday, December 3 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 4 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, December 5 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Wednesday, December 8 at 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, December 9 at 7:00 p.m.
- Friday, December 10 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 11 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, December 12 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Wednesday, December 15 at 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, December 16 at 7:00 p.m.
- Friday, December 17 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 18 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, December 19 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m. – *ASL PERFORMANCE AT 4:00 P.M.*
- Wednesday, December 22 at 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, December 23 at 7:00 p.m.
- Sunday, December 26 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.

For more information, please visit firststage.org or call (414) 267-2961.

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About First Stage

First Stage is one of the nation's leading theaters for young people and families. First Stage touches hearts, engages minds and transforms lives by creating extraordinary theater experiences through professional theater productions that inspire, enlighten and entertain. Its Theater Academy, the nation's largest high-impact theater training program for young people, fosters life skills through stage skills and serves nearly 2,000 students each year. As Wisconsin's leader in arts-integrated education in schools, First Stage's dynamic Theater in Education programs promote literacy, character building and experiential learning throughout the curriculum, serving over 20,000 students each year. First Stage was selected to participate in the Partners in Education program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

(2012), and was the recipient of the *Milwaukee Business Journal's* Eureka Award, recognizing creativity and innovation in business, education and the arts for its Next Steps program for students on the autism spectrum (2013, 2015). First Stage is a member of TYA/USA, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the Wisconsin Alliance for Arts Education, Milwaukee Arts Partners and is a cornerstone member of the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF). firststage.org