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First Stage kicks off the New Year with **THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963**

-An exploration of how the love and strength of family can transcend adversity-

Milwaukee, WI – January 6, 2022 – First Stage, one of the nation’s leading theaters for young people and families, returns to live performances this January with a heartwarming production of **THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963** at the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater. Based on the award-winning book by **Christopher Paul Curtis** and adapted by **Cheryl L. West**, with original music by **Paris Ray Dozier** and directed by **Brandite Reed** and **Jeff Frank**, this journey into the deep South in 1963 reminds us of the importance of family, love and laughter to get through challenging times. Ten-year-old Kenny chronicles the events of a fateful summer for the Watson family of Flint, Michigan. When Kenny’s older brother Byron starts getting into too much trouble, Mama and Daddy decide the family needs to pay a visit to Grandma Sands in Alabama to set him straight. Mama, Daddy, Kenny, Byron and youngest sister Joetta set out on a cross-country journey, heading south and toward a moment in American history where the world seems to change before their eyes. Supported in part by an award from the **National Endowment for the Arts**. *Performance runtime is approximately 70 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 8+.*

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963 runs **January 21 – February 13, 2022** at the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater, located at 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets start at \$21 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.

Co-director **Brandite Reed** shared this about the play: “THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM is the perfect piece to make my directorial debut at First Stage. It’s a timeless work of art that illustrates the foundation and strength of the African American family throughout the direst of

times in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. During rehearsals, I get a sense of nostalgia watching the young performers and wonderfully talented cast of adults bring this 1963 classic to life. For me it is perfect timing to show our communities of today, how the love and the strength of family can transcend adversity of any kind. I am very thrilled to be directing this piece alongside Artistic Director Jeff Frank. Together, I feel we can highlight all the important but beautiful moments this story has to offer.”

Co-Director and Artistic Director **Jeff Frank** added: “*The Watson’s Go to Birmingham – 1963* is one of my favorite books of all time. It is laugh-out-loud funny. The self-proclaimed “weird” Watsons are an amazing family; and it is a joy to spend time with them. We follow young Kenny’s journey as he tries to make sense not only of his mixed-up family, but also the mixed-up world in which he lives. In his search for perspective, Kenny provides us all with a deeper perspective on family and on our collective history.”

BIOGRAPHIES

Christopher Paul Curtis (Author) is an American children’s books author who was born in Flint, Michigan. He is known for the Newbery Medal-winning *Bud, Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963*. The latter was adapted for a TV movie of the same name, which aired on the Hallmark Channel in 2013.

Cheryl L. West (Playwright) adapted THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963 based on the Newbery Medal-winning novel. Other plays include FANNIE: THE MUSIC AND LIFE OF FANNIE LOU HAMER, LAST STOP ON MARKET STREET, SHOUT SISTER SHOUT, AKEELAH AND THE BEE, PULLMAN PORTER BLUES, and JAR THE FLOOR. Her plays have been produced in England, off-Broadway, on Broadway (Play On!) and in numerous regional theaters around the country, including Seattle Repertory Theatre, Arena Stage, Old Globe, the Goodman, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Children’s Theatre Company (Minneapolis), Seattle Children’s Theatre, Chicago Children’s Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Asolo Rep, Merrimack, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Bay Street Theatre Festival, Syracuse Stage, Cleveland Play House, South Coast Repertory, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and Off-Broadway’s Manhattan Theatre Club and Second Stage. She has written TV and film projects at Disney, Paramount, MTV Films, Showtime, TNT, HBO, CBS, BET and is the Webby-nominated writer for the original web series *Diary of a Single Mom*. Ms. West is currently preparing a revival of Broadway-bound JAR THE FLOOR, and working on commissions for Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Children’s Theatre Company (Minneapolis), Goodman Theatre and Seattle Repertory Theatre.

Brandite Reed (Co-Director) is making her directorial debut at First Stage. She grew up in Milwaukee’s Bronzeville and studied classical and jazz music at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. She was introduced to musical theater through community arts organizations such as African American Children’s theater and Milwaukee Inner-city Arts Council. She performed in Black Arts MKE’s 2018 & 2019 productions of BLACK NATIVITY at the Marcus Performing Arts Center. At Skylight Music Theatre she was seen in THE LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, THE FULL

MONTY and THREE SISTERS NAMED FLO at Skylight's Cabaret. Reed is currently a Teaching Artist at Black Arts MKE, First Stage and Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

Jeff Frank (Artistic Director/Co-Director) 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.

Paris Ray Dozier (Composer) is a composer, lyricist and recording artist from Encino, California whose works span across Hip-Hop, R & B, Pop and Musical Theater genres. Born into a musical family, he became accustomed to creative expression at a very young age. Dozier's career began when he was 15, after attending the Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute in West Hollywood, CA where he performed in Shakespearean productions. Paris went on to write songs for artists on Disney Music Group's Hollywood Records, where he was also signed as a singer-songwriter and producer. Soon after his tenure at Hollywood Records, Paris became the musical theme writer and co-host for *B In Tune TV*, which aired on the UPN Network, ABC Television, NBC and Fox. Paris has done work for Above Average Productions' *The Kicker*; the online comedy platform of *Saturday Night Live* creator Lorne Michaels and SNL's co-head writer, Bryan Tucker. Paris produced the music for the musical comedy sketch *Hold 'Em Back* starring SNL star Keenan Thompson. Paris also composed the music, lyrics and original scores for various plays and musicals including *IN THE BLOOD*, *LAST STOP ON MARKET STREET*, *THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM*, *GIRLHOOD*, *MR. CHICKEE'S FUNNY MONEY* and *X MARKS THE SPOT*. In 2018, he was brought on as the composer for the Lyric Opera of Chicago's Empower Youth project. Paris continues to work on a variety of endeavors, ranging from commercial Hip-Hop/R & B recordings to musical theatre projects.

ADULT CAST

Cynthia Cobb (Grandma) returns to First Stage after last being seen in *THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER* and *THE WIZ*. Other credits include *PORGY AND BESS*, *GERSHWIN AND FRIENDS*, *AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'* (Charlaine and Armelia), *SMOKEY JOE'S CAFÉ (B.J.)*, *TINTYPES (Susannah)*, *BLUES IN THE NIGHT (The Lady)* and *THE ALL NIGHT STRUT (Woman 2)*, all at Skylight Music Theatre. Other credits include: *CAROUSEL (Carrie)* at Candlelight Dinner Playhouse, *DO BLACK PATENT LEATHER SHOES REALLY REFLECT UP (Mary)* at Drury Lane Theatre, *ELMER GANTRY (Epatha)* at Marriott Theatre at Lincolnshire, *COWGIRLS (Lee)* at Northlight Theatre and *SHOWBOAT (Queenie)* at Gateway Playhouse.

Krystal Drake (Mama) cultivated her craft of acting at UW-Milwaukee, where she earned a degree in Theatre. Krystal has also studied acting at the renowned Ivana Chubbuck Studio in Los Angeles, CA. Past theater credits include: *THE SNOWY DAY AND OTHER STORIES BY EZRA JACK KEATS (First Stage)*; *PRIDE & JOY THE MARVIN GAYE MUSICAL (New Day Entertainment)*; *STRANGE SNOW (Milwaukee Chamber Theatre)*; *PIPPIN (Skylight Music Theatre)*; *NUBIAN*

STORIES (Renaissance Theaterworks) and THE MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF EDWARD TULANE (Children's Theater of Madison).

Sherrick Robinson (Daddy) is a native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin and thrilled to be back at First Stage! He has appeared on stage for Skylight Music Theatre (HAIR), First Stage (LUCHADORA, HOLES), Forward Theater (SKELETON CREW), Children's Theatre of Madison (SHREK THE MUSICAL, SEUSSICAL THE MUSICAL), and has appeared in Milwaukee Chamber Theatre's Young Playwrights Festival, Milwaukee Black Theater Festival and THE ISLAND.
sherrickrobinson.com

YOUNG PERFORMER CASTS

Young Performer roles are double cast. Young Performers in the Flint Cast include: **Reece Davis** (Milwaukee) as Kenny; **Ryon Davis** (Milwaukee) as Byron; **Amira Harris** (Milwaukee) as Joey and **Miles Coppage** (Wauwatosa) as Buphead.

Young Performers in the Birmingham Cast include: **Zephaniah Singh Ponder** (Brookfield) as Kenny; **Michael Loomans** (Slinger) as Byron; **Paisley Luna** (Mequon) as Joey and **Jonathan Edwards** (Milwaukee) as Buphead.

The Artistic Staff for **THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963** includes: **Brandite Reed** (Co-Director); **Jeff Frank** (Artistic Director/Co-Director); **Sydney Lynne Thomas** (Scenic Designer); **Jared Gooding** (Lighting Designer); **Zak Stowe** (Associate Lighting Designer); **Kevin O'Donnell** (Sound Designer); **Ron S. McCan** (Costume Designer); **Lyndsey Kuhlmann** (Assistant Costume Designer); **Melissa L. Wanke**, Member of Actors' Equity Association, (Production Stage Manager) and **Megan Harris** (Assistant Stage Manager).

Tickets start at \$21 – 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 and updates can be viewed here: firststage.org/covid-19-safety-protocols/#performances.

Special events for THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963

Pay What You Choose Performance: Friday, January 28, 2022 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: Saturday, February 12, 2022 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: Saturday, January 29, 2022 at 4 p.m.

A Sensory Friendly Performance with accommodations for families with children on the autism spectrum will take place on Saturday, January 29 at 4 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: THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963

Based on the book “The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963” by Christopher Paul Curtis

Adapted by Cheryl L. West

Original Music by Paris Ray Dozier

Directed by Brandite Reed and Jeff Frank

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

Live Performances: January 21 – February 13, 2022

Description: Ten-year-old Kenny chronicles the events of a fateful summer for the Watson family of Flint, Michigan. When Kenny’s older brother Byron starts getting into too much trouble, Mama and Daddy decide the family needs to pay a visit to Grandma Sands in Alabama to set him straight. Mama, Daddy, Kenny, Byron and youngest sister Joetta set out on a cross-country journey, heading south and toward a moment in American history where the world seems to change before their eyes. *Performance runtime is approximately 70 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 8+.*

Performances:

- Friday, January 21 at 7:00 p.m. – *OPENING NIGHT*
- Saturday, January 22 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, January 23 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m.
- Friday, January 28 at 7:00 p.m. – *PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE*
- Saturday, January 29 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m. – *SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE AT 4:00 p.m.*
- Sunday, January 30 at 1:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
- Friday, February 4 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, February 5 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m.
- Sunday, February 6 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m.
- Friday, February 11 at 7:00 p.m.

- Saturday, February 12 at 1:00 & 4:00 p.m. – *ASL INTERPRETED PERFORMANCE at 4:00 p.m.*
- Sunday, February 13 at 1:00 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