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FIRST STAGE announces a season filled with music, joy and adventure for 2022/23

-Featuring new works by three First Stage Resident Playwrights-

Milwaukee, WI – May 17, 2022 – First Stage, one of the nation’s leading theaters for young people and families, is excited to announce their 2022/23 season. The full season kicks off in October at the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater with the fun world premiere musical **ARTHUR AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL!** written by **First Stage Resident Playwright John Maclay** (**THE LEGEND OF ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS**), with music and lyrics by Brett Ryback. Then in November, **RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL** returns to the Todd Wehr to get audiences young and old into the holiday spirit. The new year begins with a loving ode to family, **CARMELA FULL OF WISHES**, an adaption by **First Stage Resident Playwright Alvaro Saar Rios** (**ON THE WINGS OF A MARIPOSA**) and based on the book by Matt de La Peña and illustrated by Christian Robinson. (**LAST STOP ON MARKET STREET**, another play adapted from a Matt de La Peña book, is currently running at Milwaukee Youth Arts Center through June 12, 2022.) In March, the delightfully quirky and hopeful **THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL** newly adapted for Young Audiences comes to the Todd Wehr, a production bursting at the seams with optimism and loaded with songs from popular musicians like Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith, Cyndi Lauper, John Legend and Panic! At The Disco, to name a few. The final production at the Todd Wehr will be Bob Marley’s **THREE LITTLE BIRDS**, a timeless tale of peace and love filled with music from the legendary reggae artist.

First Stage has scheduled a variety of offerings in the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center’s newly remodeled theater-in-the-round Goodman Mainstage Hall. Opening in early February 2023 will be the **THE HOBBIT**, an energetic adaptation by Greg Banks and based on the book *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Directed by Jeff Frank, the play follows Bilbo Baggins on an epic magical journey showing us that courage is about taking on a challenge despite our fears while also reminding us of what it is to be a true friend.

First Stage's award-winning Young Company will also present two Performance Projects at Milwaukee Youth Arts Center beginning with William Shakespeare's enchanting comedy *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* in December. That will be followed by a production in March of *LITTLE WOMEN*, by Kate Hamill, adapted from the celebrated coming-of-age novel by Louisa May Alcott. The final Young Company presentation for the 2022/23 season will be the fully mounted world premiere production of *THE GRACIOUS SISTERS*, by **First Stage Resident Playwright Alice Austen** (*GIRLS IN THE BOAT*), and freely adapted from *The Eumenides*, by Aeschylus. It is an exploration of the balance of a desire for vengeance and the need for grace. This play is part of World Premiere Wisconsin, a statewide festival celebrating new plays and musicals.

Tickets

First Stage offers three ways to purchase tickets for its 2022/23 season. **The All-Access Membership** will give families the opportunity to purchase tickets at 25% off regular single ticket prices, receive discounts on Theater Academy classes, invitations to special Preview Events and more. The cost of the All-Access Membership is \$75 per household and are on sale now. Families can also purchase the traditional **Family Package**, which offers a 30% discount off regular single ticket prices when building a season package of three or more plays. Family Packages are also now on sale. Single tickets to First Stage's 2022/23 season will go on sale **August 1, 2022**.

For additional information about the 2022/23 season and to order tickets, please go to firststage.org/ or call **(414) 267-2961**.

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

FIRST STAGE'S 2022/23 SEASON OF PLAYS

ARTHUR AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL!

Book and Lyrics by **John Maclay**, Music and Lyrics by **Brett Ryback**

Adapted from the books and characters created by **Marc Brown**

Directed and Choreographed by **Khalia Davis**

Music Direction by **Brett Ryback**

October 7 – November 6, 2022

Marcus Center's Todd Wehr Theater

Sponsored by Children's Wisconsin

Big things are happening at Lakewood Elementary School! Mr. Ratburn's class is asked to write and perform a big show for all of Elwood City. Everyone is so excited! Everyone, except for Arthur. What should he do? Arthur feels more nervous as the big performance gets closer and closer. With the help of his family and friends Buster, Brain, Francine, Muffy – and even little

sister D.W. – Arthur learns the importance of being his best, unique self. All aboard for an incredibly fun ride with this world premiere musical! *Suggested for families with young people ages 5+.*

From Artistic Director Jeff Frank: “I am so thankful to the writing team of John Maclay and Brett Ryback, director Khalia Davis, producer Todd Gershwin, and of course Marc Brown for their contributions over the last couple years as we have workshopped and shaped the show. There is a reason *Arthur* was the second longest running animated series ever. Marc Brown paints a world that, although populated by animals, speaks with truth and respect to the joys and challenges of growing up. Like all of us, Arthur has fears and doubts, but with the help and support of his friends and family Arthur rises to the occasion and discovers the power in his own story.”

From Director Khalia Davis: “Arthur was such a beloved part of my childhood so to get the opportunity to celebrate the legacy of the books and television series by expanding the world into a fun, family-friendly musical, is a dream! I am most excited for audiences to see their favorite characters in new, timely stories that maintain the beautiful essence and spirit of the work.”

RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL

Based on the animated television special “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and the stage production directed and conceived by **Jeff Frank** and **First Stage**.

Script adaptation by **Robert Penola**. Arrangements and orchestrations by **Timothy Splain**.

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” animated television special adapted from a story by **Robert L. May** and the song by **Johnny Marks**, music and lyrics by Johnny Marks. All elements © and ™ under license to Character Arts, LLC.

Directed by **Jeff Frank**

November 25 – December 24, 2022

Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater

Sponsored by Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren and Associated Bank

And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows! The beloved TV classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* soars off the screen and returns to our stage this holiday season. From fleeing the Abominable Snow Monster to saving Christmas, join Rudolph and his friends, Hermey the Elf and Yukon Cornelius, as their adventures teach us that what makes you different can be what makes you special. Don’t miss this wonderful holiday tradition that speaks to the little misfit in all of us. *Suggested for families with young people ages 4+.*

From Jeff: “This joyful holiday tale will once again come to life at the Todd Wehr courtesy of some clever staging, the remarkable design work of Brandon Kirkham and our incredible production department who crafted this piece with such care and detail. Rudolph, Hermey and the Toys remind us all that there is a place for everyone. There really is no such thing as a misfit – just a world that needs to learn to welcome people as they are. No one should have to worry

about covering up who they are to seek acceptance. After all – it turns out that even the Bumble is misunderstood. From the incredible music of Johnny Marks, to the adventures with the Bumble, to the lovable inhabitants of the Island of Misfit Toys, to the hilarious antics of Yukon Cornelius, to the heartwarming storytelling of Sam the Snowman – Rudolph has something for the entire family to celebrate this holiday season.”

CARMELA FULL OF WISHES

Adapted by **Alvaro Saar Rios**

From the book by **Matt de la Peña**, Illustrated by **Christian Robinson**

Published by G.P. Putnam’s Sons Books for Young Readers

“Carmela Full of Wishes” was Co-Commissioned by and received its World Premiere

Productions at Chicago Children’s Theatre, Jacqueline Russell, Artistic Director;

and The Rose Theatre of Nebraska, Matt Gutschick, Artistic Director

Directed by **Michelle Lopez-Rios**

January 20 – February 12, 2023

Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater

Sponsored by PNC

It’s Carmela’s birthday, and her wish has already come true – she’s finally old enough to join her big brother as he does the family errands! As they travel through the neighborhood, Carmela finds a lone dandelion growing in the pavement. Before she can blow its puffy white fluff away, her brother tells her she has to make a wish. If only she can think of just the right wish to make. Delight in this moving ode to family, to dreamers and to finding hope in the most unexpected places. *Suggested for families with young people ages 3+.*

From Director Michelle Lopez-Rios: “In CARMELA FULL OF WISHES, we take a big journey with Carmela on her birthday. Like the book, the play delivers a world that stimulates all the senses. The imaginative set, costume, sound and lighting designs of the production will play a vital role in bringing this world to life. There are fields of bright orange marigolds, tastes of paletas (popsicles), smells of fresh laundry and the beauty of life by the sea. As she tags along to run errands with her Big Brother, we travel through the vibrant community that is their home. We watch as Carmela dreams up the perfect wish for her birthday and reveals what life is like for her family. Family is at the heart of this journey. . . . It is a story that we all need to know and understand. As Carmela dashes along the streets on her worn green scooter taking in the world around her, we witness the deep and endless love of this family and we feel the resilience of hope.”

THE HOBBIT

Based on *The Hobbit* by **J.R.R. Tolkien**

Licensed by Middle-earth Enterprises

Adapted for the Stage by **Greg Banks**

Produced by special arrangement with Plays for New Audiences

Directed by **Jeff Frank**

February 3 – March 5, 2023

Goodman Mainstage Hall, Milwaukee Youth Arts Center

Our unlikely hero, Bilbo Baggins, would much rather be sitting in their cozy Hobbit Hole with a cup of tea and a plate of bacon and eggs. However, they somehow find themselves on a magically mystical adventure. Staged with speed and surprises, you'll be delighted as things change before your very eyes. Discover what happens as Bilbo travels on an epic journey over freezing mountains and a frightening forest, meeting all sorts of fierce creatures – some who want to eat them, others who turn into dear friends. *Suggested for families with young people ages 8+.*

From Jeff: "5 actors. 1 musician. 32 characters. 90 minutes. 1 epic tale brought magically to life on a theatrical adventure unlike anything seen before at First Stage! I love the fast-paced, energetic adaptation by Greg Banks with actors switching characters at the drop of a hat or the donning of a costume piece. He has distilled the adventure to its essential elements and the audience is quickly swept up along with Bilbo. The intimate nature of the Goodman Mainstage Hall with the audience surrounding the stage, invites them to join Bilbo's adventure. I envision the production set in the broken down, war-ravaged remains of a library. When reason has left us and greed and a lust for power have taken over – the pillars of society have crumbled – knowledge, truth, self-growth, empathy and understanding that our stories have provided us have been lost and must be looked to again. Bilbo shows us that courage is about taking on a challenge despite our fears and reminds us what it means to be a friend. They are the hero we all long to be."

THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL for Young Audiences

Based on the series by **Stephen Hillenberg**

Book by **Kyle Jarrow**

Original songs by Yolanda Adams, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith, Sara Bareilles, Jonathan Coulton, Alexander Ebert of Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros, The Flaming Lips, Lady A, Cyndi Lauper, John Legend, Panic! At the Disco, Plain White T's, They Might Be Giants and T.I., and songs by David Bowie, Tom Kenny and Andy Paley

Additional lyrics are by Jonathan Coulton, with additional music by Tom Kitt

The musical production was conceived by **Tina Landau**

Directed by **Tommy Novak**

Choreographed by **Katelin Zelon**

March 3 – April 2, 2023

Marcus Center's Todd Wehr Theater

Sponsored by the Molitor Foundation

Are you ready, kids? Dive into the undersea town of Bikini Bottom with SpongeBob and his quirky circle of friends and neighbors – Patrick, Sandy, Squidward, Mr. Krabs and even Plankton – in this dynamic stage musical with songs from music's most legendary artists. Chaos erupts

when SpongeBob and all of Bikini Bottom face the total annihilation at the threat of Mt. Humongous. Just when all hope seems lost, a most unexpected hero rises up and takes center stage. The power of optimism really can save the world! *Suggested for families with young people ages 6+.*

From Director Tommy Novak: “Who lives in a pineapple under the Sea?’ SPONGEBOB SQUARE PANTS!!!!” The thing about SpongeBob is that he is a simple sponge with a huge heroic heart. When the world is a horrible, miserable place, we need optimism and positivity that only SpongeBob can bring to the any situation. SpongeBob is the biggest example of “I can’t is not in my vocabulary.” There is no task too large or too scary. Any task can be accomplished with teamwork and a community of support. This show reminds us that we are a community responsible for working together and taking care of each other. Today is a gift and tomorrow is not promised so live each day as if it is your last with a full heart of kindness, joy and laughter.”

Bob Marley’s THREE LITTLE BIRDS

Based on a story by **Cedella Marley**

Music and Lyrics by **Bob Marley**

Adapted for the stage by **Michael J. Bobbitt**

Arrangements, Orchestrations, Additional Musical & Lyrics by John L. Cornelius II

Directed by **Samantha D. Montgomery**

Choreographed by **Sonya Thompson** of Ko-Thi Dance Company

April 21 – May 21, 2023

Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater

Ziggy’s afraid to leave the house. He’s too busy worrying about tropical storms, evil spirits, and the sneaky, hair-grabbing trickster, Duppy. With the help of his feathered friends, Ziggy will learn that “every little thing is gonna be all right!” With music from the legendary reggae artist, get jammin’ with this timeless tale of peace and love. *Suggested for families with young people ages 3+.*

From Jeff: “Inspired by the music of Bob Marley and a story by his daughter Cedella, this show is an upbeat reggae musical celebration filled with colorful characters that will make you want to move and to cheer for our hero Ziggy. Come feel the warmth of the rich Jamaican culture and the sun amidst the timeless music including *One Love, Three Little Birds* and *Don’t Rock My Boat*. The show will put a bounce in your step and leave you humming “. . . don’t worry ‘bout a thing.”

From Director Samantha Montgomery: “Ziggy is fearful about what might happen to him and this restricts him from living and enjoying the adventures of life. This play, Bob Marley’s THREE LITTLE BIRDS, adapted for the stage by Michael J. Bobbitt, encourages us to enjoy the adventures of life by not allowing our fears to stifle us. Instead, we must rebuild ourselves and overcome our fears by finding the strength within ourselves to make bravery our only choice.”

FIRST STAGE YOUNG COMPANY PRESENTATIONS
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
By **William Shakespeare**

December 9 – 18, 2022

Goodman Mainstage Hall, Milwaukee Youth Arts Center
Sponsored by UPAF

Follow the misadventures of fairies, nobles, and craftsmen through the forests of Athens over the course of one magical evening. Love triangles, mistaken identities and alarming transformations are abound in Shakespeare's most enchanting comedy. *Suggested for families with young people ages 11+.*

From Director of the Young Company Matt Daniels: "A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM is one of Shakespeare's most enduring and popular plays for a reason. It is full of fun, fantasy, mischief and beautiful language, making it a perfect fit for our award-winning Young Company. I first encountered this play as an actor when I was in high school, and it left an indelible mark, setting me on a path to a life rich in Shakespeare's work. I trust it will be the same for these seasoned young artists."

LITTLE WOMEN

By **Kate Hamill**

Adapted from the novel by **Louisa May Alcott**

March 24 – April 2, 2023

Goodman Mainstage Hall, Milwaukee Youth Arts Center
Sponsored by UPAF

Jo March isn't your typical Victorian lady. She's ruthless and headstrong, and destined to be a great American novelist. As Jo and her sisters grow up in the middle of the Civil War, they strive to be brave, intelligent and imaginative young women, while reconciling their own ambitions with society's expectations. Alcott's celebrated coming-of-age novel comes to stage in this modern and relevant adaptation. *Suggested for families with young people ages 12+.*

From Matt: "Kate Hamill's adaptation of this essential American story manages to be startlingly modern even as it explores a long-gone era. This play is about whip-smart, resilient, sparkling young women looking to make their mark on a world that may not be ready for them. Sounds like an ideal match for YC's excellent performers! This version of the story is intimate, beautiful and surprising, just as Alcott's novel is to anyone who picks it up for the first time."

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM and LITTLE WOMEN are Young Company Performance Projects. These actor-driven presentations use elemental production values, enhancing the connection of actor to audience, allowing the words of the play to come alive in exciting ways.

These award-winning students will showcase their graduate level skills with full-length material, from Shakespeare to American classics to pieces commissioned specially for them.

THE GRACIOUS SISTERS

By **Alice Austen**

World Premiere

A free adaptation of *The Eumenides*, by **Aeschylus**

Directed by **Matt Daniels**

May 5 – 21, 2023

Goodman Mainstage Hall, Milwaukee Youth Arts Center

Sponsored by UPAF

When archaeological intern Alice falls down an ancient Greek rabbit hole, she discovers the aftermath of a violent murder, with the goddesses of vengeance, or “Furies,” chasing down the accused to exact bloody retribution. Athena, the goddess of wisdom (and war), persuades the Furies that the accused should have a fair trial before a jury. When the jury is divided in a split decision, all must come to terms with the balance of a desire for vengeance, and the need for grace. *Suggested for families with young people ages 13+.*

From Matt: “I love ancient Greek plays almost as much as I love Shakespeare, so the opportunity to partner with one of First Stage’s playwrights in residence to bring one of these pieces into our modern age was too good to pass up. After her amazing work on GIRLS IN THE BOAT, I knew Alice Austen was the ultimate fit for creating a play for our young people that highlights their unique blend of curiosity and determinism. Especially as we all traverse this incredibly unstable era of modern history.”

This play is part of World Premiere Wisconsin, a statewide festival celebrating new plays and musicals.

For additional information about the 2022/23 season, please visit to firststage.org/ or call (414) 267-2961.

Amplify Reading Series

Understanding the power of connection that young people feel when they see themselves and their stories on stage, First Stage is excited to begin the next phase of the Amplify series featuring new and developing work from traditionally underrepresented playwrights and directors whose voices offer an opportunity to expand First Stage’s artistic horizons and develop its audience’s perspective. During the 2022/23 season, the focus shifts from producing short plays to presenting readings of three plays in various stages of development. The Amplify Reading Series gives First Stage a chance to explore new work that is being considered for a full

production while also engaging the community in discussion about the process of developing new plays.

From Jeff: “We’re excited to continue our investment in new play development and in lifting up the voices of underrepresented artists. We also look forward to engaging our audiences in conversation about the work as we consider selections for future seasons.”

Please note: Dates and titles are still being finalized for the Amplify Reading Series. Please visit firststage.org/ for the latest updates.

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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