



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## In a year with challenges and uncertainty, First Stage shows resiliency and creativity

*-Season highlights include nationally recognized virtual programming-*

**Milwaukee, WI – May 19, 2021** – First Stage, one of the nation’s leading theaters for young people and families, demonstrated resiliency and creativity during the 2020/21 season, the year everything changed and turned upside down. Like arts and cultural groups across the country, First Stage had to stop live in-person performances and look for new ways to engage audiences, students and families.

### Through Our Lens – A Virtual Season of Plays

In reflecting on the 2020/21 season First Stage Artistic Director **Jeff Frank** shared: “In the face of all of the challenges to the process of creation this past year, the First Stage staff, alongside artists from around the country, found new and powerful ways to connect with our audiences. Among the highlights at First Stage was the world premiere web series THE QUEST FOR SOLOMON’S TREASURE, written by John Maclay and directed by Theater Academy alum and Hollywood actor Jeremy Tardy. This virtual production treated audiences to a high-stakes mystery/adventure that traveled virtually around Milwaukee. The show was highlighted at a national level during a Theatre for Young Audiences USA (TYA/USA) seminar exploring new work in the digital realm and was subsequently invited to be part of the Digital Showcase at the TYA/USA annual conference.”

Frank continued, “During ESCAPE FROM PELIGRO ISLAND, which was on view at the beginning of the year, audiences used their phones to vote live on the choices of the young hero as they journeyed through a virtual adventure. I am still in awe of our actors, designers and staff who were prepared for any one of over 1,000 potential combinations of choices. Most recently, First Stage launched **Amplify – First Stage’s BIPOC Virtual Short Play Series**, lifting the voices of playwrights who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color, expanding First Stage’s

commitment to new play development and our mission to ensure that the stories we tell and the tellers of those tales reflect the wonder and complexity of our community. Our award-winning Young Company continued their legacy of excellence with a virtual production of TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA and a radio play version of THE CRUCIBLE.”

In summarizing, Frank added: “At a time when we were faced with some of our greatest challenges, the First Stage staff responded with tremendous creativity, innovation and passion – finding ways to connect with and serve our audiences. We’ve learned a lot – from the nuances of filming theater to navigating livestreaming – and we are ready to take that learning forward into our future.”

### **Community Support**

As First Stage pivoted into offering an all-virtual 2020/21 season, support from the community was critical in making this possible. “We have been so grateful to have sponsorships from Children’s Wisconsin, PNC and Associated Bank, who helped make it possible for hundreds of families to view our Virtual Season of Plays – and for the generous support from the Burke Foundation, Bader Philanthropies, Herzfeld Foundation, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Northwestern Mutual Foundation, Melitta S. Pick Charitable Trust, Frank L. Weyenberg Charitable Trust, Stackner Foundation and many others who ensured we were able to continue our programming,” said Managing Director **Betsy Corry**. “And we can’t thank our longtime supporters at the Molitor Foundation enough for matching dollars made to our 2020/21 HOPE Fund Relief Initiative, which has raised \$276,520 to date in support of the First Stage staff.”

Added First Stage Development Director **Nancy Clarkin**, “First Stage is also very grateful to our Board of Directors, Committee Members and all of our incredible families and supporters who have helped us and continue to help us make it through this challenging season. We recently completed our 11<sup>th</sup> annual Bard-O-thon, where students raised over \$17,000 in pledges to support our Shakespeare programming. This fall, we engaged more than 100 guests with our annual ImpACT Event. We also pivoted our signature events to virtual platforms and continued to engage our attendees raising nearly \$70,000 at our Wine Event and \$130,000 with our Make Believe Ball. With continued community support from the United Performing Arts Fund, First Stage has been able to fulfill its mission of transforming lives through theater.”

### **Theater Academy**

In addition to the all-virtual season of plays, First Stage Theater Academy successfully and safely launched a combination of both virtual and smaller, in-person classes that provided a lifeline to more than 1,300 student enrollments during the Summer and School Year sessions. Among its popular class offerings for students included its Virtual Master Class series for middle and high school students, in which students had the unique opportunity to learn specific theater topics from professional theater artists, including Auditioning, Acting for the Singer, Comedy Writing and Satire, and Puppetry. Another popular Academy class, offered in-person at the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center, were its Performance Experience classes, offering students in grades 3 and

up the opportunity to broaden performance skills and perform a popular show as their final presentation, including MOANA, JR., FROZEN, JR. and RENT. All classes and rehearsals were socially distanced with students and staff wearing appropriate face coverings and final presentations were made available for families to view virtually.

**Neil Willenson**, Academy parent and Vice President of Community Relations, Kapco, said, “I am so impressed with what First Stage managed to pull off. Despite a pandemic, required masks and social distancing, you somehow made this work! This is so inventive and really is a model for how folks can still create art safely over the coming months.”

### **Theater in Education**

Thanks to the generous support of the United Performing Arts Fund’s Kasey’s Fund, First Stage was also able to provide its on-demand, virtual School Membership Package free of charge to select schools this year. Created with the understanding that schools needed support and flexibility during an uncertain time, the School Membership Package provided educators on-demand access to arts-integrated and standards-based programming. First Stage piloted a nomination process in order to strategically select schools with the most need and greatest potential of a successful partnership. Parents, educators, school staff and other community members submitted more than 80 nominations for this special opportunity.

First Stage selected 18 elementary schools to receive its free virtual School Membership Package. Winners included: Christ-St. Peter Lutheran School; Dimensions of Learning Academy; Dunwiddie Elementary School; Forest Home Avenue School; General Mitchell Elementary School; Hartford Avenue Elementary School; Horace Mann Elementary School; Luther Burbank School; Maryland Avenue Montessori; Milwaukee Academy of Science; Milwaukee College Preparatory – Lloyd Street; Milwaukee Sign Language School; Rocketship Southside Community Prep; Saint Sebastian School; Seeds of Health Elementary School; U.S. Grant School; Wilson Elementary School and Woodlands State Street School.

In addition to its successful School Membership Package, the Theater in Education team also launched a new virtual interactive theater experience called ADVENTURES WITH THE THREE LITTLE PIGS that has been a big hit with families and classrooms. **Mrs. Beth Lynch**, a teacher with Lyons Center School, had this to say about her experience: “I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to ‘go on a field trip’ with my students. The show was adorable, and the students loved it! I also liked the materials that you included. We always enjoy First Stage shows and ADVENTURES WITH THE THREE LITTLE PIGS did not disappoint. Looking forward to next year’s show!”

### **First Stage Branding/Marketing and Sales Successes**

Marketing and Communications Director **Jennifer Hubbartt** shared her thoughts on this past season: “At the onset of the pandemic, First Stage’s marketing effort shifted quickly to focus solely on maintaining a consistent and engaging presence with our audiences in a virtual space.

Working with our artistic and programming teams that were vital in creating content to offer digitally, First Stage launched further into its best-performing social media platforms to deliver insightful, engaging and interactive video content. Unified with a refreshed logo and cohesive brand presence, First Stage positioned itself to keep top of mind to our loyal and newer audiences, building our brand to set the stage for long-term success when we can return to live performances. The results? A 12% increase of ticket buyers outside of our region, with 35% of this season's ticket buyers being new to First Stage; a 58% year-over-year increase of our YouTube subscribers; over 6,600 total views of ticketed and complimentary virtual performances, all with a level of local and regional media coverage comparable to a pre-pandemic performance season."

First Stage Board President **Caryn Esten** offered these final thoughts: "In a season with so much fear, uncertainty and change, I feel honored to have worked with the First Stage Board and staff this past year. I am proud of our accomplishments and how we've managed to stay aligned with the First Stage mission. It's been a remarkable year requiring constant reevaluation, reconfiguring, transparent communication and flexibility, and I wholeheartedly believe that First Stage has come out of this experience stronger, more resilient and beautifully poised for its next chapter."

#### **FACT SHEET**

**THE QUEST FOR SOLOMON'S TREASURE:** streaming **now – May 30, 2021**. For more information and to order tickets, please go to: [www.firststage.org/quest](http://www.firststage.org/quest)

**ADVENTURES OF THE THREE LITTLE PIGS:** steaming **now – May 30, 2021**. For more information and to order tickets, please go to: [www.FirstStage.org/threepigs](http://www.FirstStage.org/threepigs)

**UNMUTED:** streaming **now – May 30, 2021** at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fFcaUQFDJc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fFcaUQFDJc)

**HOPE Fund Relief Initiative:** Donations are still being accepted through **June 30, 2021**. To learn more or to donate, please go to: [First Stage Hope Fund](#)

**First Stage Summer Theater Academy 2021:** Registration is now open for session dates that run **Monday, June 14, 2021 – Friday, August 13, 2021**. To view the list of summer classes, please visit: [www.firststage.org/summer](http://www.firststage.org/summer). For more information, call **414-267-2970**.

For more information on First Stage, please visit [www.firststage.org](http://www.firststage.org)

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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). [www.firststage.org](http://www.firststage.org).