



CHILDREN'S THEATER • IN-SCHOOL EDUCATION • THEATER ACADEMY

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**The Herdmans are back and more gnarly than ever in
First Stage Children's Theater's 80s-inspired holiday production of
THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER**

By Barbara Robinson

Directed by Jeff Frank

Media sponsors: Fox 6, 99.1 FM WMYX and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

**Todd Wehr Theater, Marcus Center for the Performing Arts
November 27 – December 24, 2009**

This play is most appreciated by adults, teens and children ages four and older.

Milwaukee, Wis. (October 26, 2009) – The Herdmans are back and funnier than ever in First Stage Children's Theater's seventh production of the perennial holiday favorite, THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER. The show runs November 27 through December 24, 2009 at the Todd Wehr Theater in the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets 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 www.FirstStage.org.

The six Herdman kids – Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys – are “the worst kids in the whole history of the world!” They eat doughnuts that were bought for the firemen, write dirty words on the shell of a girl's turtle and put tadpoles in the

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EVER/add one**

drinking fountain! So naturally, the whole town is horrified when they hear the Herdmans are starring in the annual Christmas pageant.

As predicted, disaster strikes as rehearsals begin. The Herdmans are initiating fights, saying bad words in church – they are even accused of starting a small fire! When the big day arrives, the whole town shows up just to see what the Herdmans will do this time. To everyone’s surprise, the Herdmans – experiencing the magic of the Christmas story for the first time – rise to the occasion, defy expectations, and make this year’s show the best Christmas pageant ever.

“This will be the seventh time First Stage has produced this show in our 23 seasons, and with good reason,” said **Jeff Frank, First Stage artistic director and director** of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER. “The show is laugh-out-loud funny, and then surprises you with tremendous heart,” continues Frank.

Adding a unique element to this year’s production, the 2009 production of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER will bring audiences back in time to the 1980s, setting this holiday classic in that radical decade. “I thought it might be fun to go back to the 1980s to provide a treat for parents who remember those years,” explained Frank. “The 80s excess, the New Romantic movement and the hair metal band inspired fashions – teased hair, ripped jeans and neon clothing – offered a stark contrast to the glory of a group of children discovering the true meaning of the holidays, and their peers discovering that there is more to people than we know.”

Each performance of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER will feature a different special guest in a featured walk-on role. Local luminaries to include: the

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EVER/add two**

Honorable **Mayor Tom Barrett**; actor and Milwaukee personality **John McGivern**; radio hosts **Elizabeth Kay**, **Van McNeal** and **Tony Lorino** of 99.1 FM WMYX; **Meg McKenzie and Dave Murphy** of My 95.7 FM's "Murphy & Meg in the Morning," actor **Mark Metcalf**; **Brent "Buzz" Williams**, head coach of Marquette University's men's basketball team; **Gus Gnorski** of Fox 6's Wake-Up News; Milwaukee Ballet's Artistic Director **Michael Pink**; Olympic speed skater **Bonnie Blair** and her daughter Blair Cruikshank; WISN Channel 12 anchor **Terry Sater** and more.

At the beginning of the second act, Mrs. McCarthy – played by actress Molly Rhode – will find the special guest from his seat in the audience and bring the guest on stage, during her sing-along. Staying true to the production's setting of the 1980s, this scene will feature an improvisation with the actors and special guest on stage, complete with Jane Fonda-inspired aerobics moves, as made famous during that radical decade.

"Because of our experience in producing this play, and the improvised nature of this script, THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER presents us with the unique opportunity to allow walk-on roles during each performance," said Frank. "We're delighted to share the spotlight with a wide variety of esteemed members of our rich community, and I'm sure our local celebrities will have a ball during their time on stage," continued Frank.

Author Barbara Robinson, born October 24, 1927, is an American author best known for her books targeted at children, particularly "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" (1972) and "The Best School Year Ever" (1994). Robinson grew up in the small town of Portsmouth, Ohio on the Ohio River. Her father died when she was three. Robinson's mother, a schoolteacher in Portsmouth for 49 years, fostered her interest in books and she began writing very early. Robinson attended Harvard College. She received an honorary

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EVER/add three**

doctorate of letters from Harvard. In addition to her children's books, Robinson has published dozens of short stories in magazines such as McCall's and Ladies Home Journal and has also written plays and poetry. She currently lives in Berwyn, Penn., a suburb of Philadelphia. She has two daughters and two grandchildren.

Director Jeff Frank has been First Stage's artistic director since February 2003. Previously he had served as education director/associate artistic director. Jeff is a native Wisconsinite who earned a BFA in theater from UW-Whitewater and went on to the University of Utah, earning an MFA in child drama. Over the past 12 seasons Jeff has directed many First Stage productions, including THE NEVERENDING STORY, SLEEPING BEAUTY, TOM SAWYER, SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON, LILLY'S PURPLE PLASTIC PURSE, A LITTLE HOUSE CHRISTMAS, THE HOBBIT, A MIDNIGHT CRY, PERSEUS BAYOU, A CHRISTMAS STORY and THE GIVER. Jeff currently serves on the Board of Directors for Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)/USA, the national service organization promoting the power of professional theatre for young audiences.

The adult actor cast of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER includes **Todd Denning** (member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers, as Bob Bradley), **Angela Iannone** (member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers, as Mrs. Armstrong), **Mary MacDonald Kerr** (member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers, as Grace Bradley), **Molly Rhode** (as Mrs. McCarthy) and **Jeff Schaetzke** (as Reverend Hopkins).

Young performer roles are double-cast, with 33 young performers in each cast. The young performers in the "Pop Rocks" cast of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

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EVER/add four**

EVER includes **Ariel Cohn** (as Baby Angel 7) and **Benjamin Cohn** (as Hobie) from Bayside; **Anna Arenas** (as Gladys) from Brown Deer; **Brianna White** (as Baby Angel 3) from Cedarburg; **Cameron Vugrinovich** (as Elmer) from Cudahy; **Kailee Rosen** (as Baby Angel 8) from Fox Point; **Alexandra Salter** (as Baby Angel 9) and **Sydney Salter** (as Baby Angel 10) from Germantown; **Henry Shotwell** (as Charlie) from Madison; **Henry Ballesteros** (as Ralph), **Madeline Fricker** (as Angel Choir 2) and **Ali Walton** (as Angel Choir 6) from Mequon; **Katie Bentley** (as Imogene), **Maya George** (as Angel Choir 4), **Julian Green** (as David), **Eliza Lore** (as Angel Choir 1), **John Williams** (as Shepherd 1) and **Teddy Warren** (as Teddy) from Milwaukee; **Sophia Webber** (as Beverly) from Mukwonago; **Nicholas Jerred** (as Claude) from Oconomowoc; **Louie Chapman** (as Ollie) and **Lena Essak** (as Baby Angel 4) from Shorewood; **Luke Czerwinski** (as Baby Angel 1) from Saint Francis; **Sydney Schlager** (as Doris) from South Milwaukee; **Katie Pierce** (as Maxine) from Waukesha; **Andrew Harter** (as Shepherd 2) from Wauwatosa; **Thomas Fleischmann** (as Baby Angel 2) from West Bend; **Meghan DeRoche** (as Baby Angel 5), **Annie Gonring** (as Beth), **Mary Elsa Henrichs** (as Alice), **Megan Huckenpahler** (as Angel Choir 5), **Emilie Rackovan** (as Angel Choir 3), **Sam Small** (as Leroy), and **Katherine Van Dyke** (as Baby Angel 6) from Whitefish Bay.

The young performers in the “New Coke” cast includes **Kelly LeTart** (as Baby Angel 6) from Bayside; **Anna McIntyre** (as Angel Choir 3) and **Rylan Smolik** (as Ollie) from Brookfield; **Mary Caroline Tilton** (as Alice) from Cedarburg; **Sarah McClure** (as Angel Choir 1) from Delafield; **David Zetley** (as Shepherd 1) from Fox Point; **Cassandra Stecker Janssen** (as Angel Choir 2) from Germantown; **Caroline Fossum** (as Angel Choir 5) from Grafton; **Danielle Bujanovich** (as Baby Angel 5) from Hales Corners; **Richard Heim** (as Claude) from Kenosha; **Kevin Back** (as Ralph) and **Grace Bobber** (as Angel Choir 4) from Mequon; **Joey Flegel-Mishlove** (as Elmer), **D’Jena**

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EVER/add five**

Kelly-Perry (as Doris), **Sam McIlheran** (as Hobie), **DeAndre Sabatino** (as David); **Maia Thompson** (as Baby Angel 10) and **Teddy Warren** (as Teddy) from Milwaukee; **Jessica Surprenant** (as Imogene) from New Berlin; **Mia Imperl** (as Maxine) from Oconomowoc; **Kruz Karstedt** (as Charlie) and **Paris Karstedt** (as Beth) from Pewaukee; **Keely Savitt** (as Baby Angel 8) from River Hills; **Abby Schill** (as Baby Angel 4) and **Sadie Wolfe** (as Baby Angel 7) from Shorewood; **Arjuna Yelanjian** (as Shepherd 2) from South Milwaukee; **Elliott Brotherhood** (as Baby Angel 2), **John Brotherhood** (as Leroy), **Luke Brotherhood** (as Baby Angel 1), and **Lilly Frank** (as Baby Angel 3) from Wauwatosa; **Ariana Padovano** (as Beverly) from West Allis; **Sophia Zappia** (as Gladys) from West Bend; and **Mieko Kuramoto** (as Angel Choir 6) and **Tory Trettin** (as Baby Angel 9) from Whitefish Bay.

The Artistic Staff for THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER includes: **Sarah Hunt-Frank** (Scenic Designer), **Kim Instenes** (Costume Designer), **Holly Blomquist** (Lighting Designer), **Ernie Brusubardis** (Sound Designer), **Mark Hare** (Props Director), **Sarah Hoffmann** (Production Stage Manager, member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers), **Matt Grundman** (Assistant Stage Manager) and **Sarah Sherwood** (Assistant Stage Manager).

Tickets for THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER start at \$10.50. Tickets may be purchased online at www.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.

Performance dates: THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER opens Friday, November 27 at 7:00 p.m. Other performances are held: Saturday, November 28 at 1:00,

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EVER/add six**

3:30 & 7:00 p.m.; Sunday, November 29 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.; Friday, December 4 at 7:00 p.m.; Saturday, December 5 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.; Sunday, December 6 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.; Friday, December 11 at 7:00 p.m.; Saturday, December 12 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.; Sunday, December 13 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.; Friday, December 18 at 7:00 p.m.; Saturday, December 19 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.; Sunday, December 20 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.; Tuesday, December 22 at 7:00 p.m.; Wednesday, December 23 at 1:00 & 7:00 p.m. and Thursday, December 24 at 1:00 p.m. The performance on Sunday, December 20 at 3:30 p.m. is interpreted for the deaf and hard of hearing patrons.

Special events for THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER

Now through Friday, November 13: First Stage and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel are holding the “My Best Christmas Ever” essay contest. Children ages 14 and under are invited to submit a brief essay sharing their best Christmas memory, explaining why it was their best Christmas ever. Entries must be mailed by November 13, 2009 to First Stage Children’s Theater, Attn: Marketing Department, 325 W. Walnut Street, Milwaukee, WI 53212.

A winner in each age category – ages five and under, ages six through nine, ages 10-11 and ages 12-14 – will be selected to win season tickets to First Stage’s 2010-2011 season. One grand prize winner will receive a two-night stay at Chula Vista Resort in the Wisconsin Dells. Winners will be chosen and contacted on or around November 16, 2009, and will be acknowledged at the opening performance of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER on Friday, November 27. Contest details available online at www.tinyurl.com/bestchristmasever.

Friday, November 27 at 7:00 p.m.: Following the opening night performance, First Stage invites all patrons to attend the Opening Night Reception at the Milwaukee Youth

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EVER/add seven**

Arts Center, 325 W. Walnut Street, approximately one mile from the Marcus Center. Patrons will have the opportunity to meet and mingle with the cast and crew of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER while enjoying refreshments, courtesy of First Stage.

Opening weekend: Friday, November 27 through Sunday, November 29:

Immediately following our opening weekend performances, a drawing for a special holiday toy and the new all-natural, non-chemical Tips Toy Cleaner, provided by Toy Tips, Inc., will be held. One winner at each performance will be selected.

Sunday, December 20 at 1:00 and 3:30 p.m.: The Milwaukee Children's Choir will sing holiday carols in the lobby at the conclusion of the 1:00 performance and during the intermission of the 3:30 performance.

Wednesday, December 23 at 7:00 p.m.: Celebrating First Stage's seventh production of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER, First Stage is hosting a Young Performer Alumni Night, inviting the nearly 400 Young Performers from the 1990, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2003 productions of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER to attend this performance.

FACT SHEET

Theater: Todd Wehr Theater, Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, 929 N. Water Street, downtown Milwaukee

Dates: Friday, November 27 through Thursday, December 24, 2009

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**First Stage heralds in the holidays with THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT
EVER/add eight**

Description: Back by popular demand, 80s style! The unruly Herdman kids are chosen to put on the annual Christmas pageant. The while town is horrified! What ensues are laughter, tears, a small fire, and the best Christmas pageant ever.

Performances:

Friday, November 27 at 7:00 p.m.
Saturday, November 28 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, November 29 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.
Friday, December 4 at 7:00 p.m.
Saturday, December 5 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 6 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.
Friday, December 11 at 7:00 p.m.
Saturday, December 12 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 13 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.
Friday, December 18 at 7:00 p.m.
Saturday, December 19 at 1:00, 3:30 & 7:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 20 at 1:00 & 3:30 p.m.
Tuesday, December 22 at 7:00 p.m.
Wednesday, December 23 at 1:00 & 7:00 p.m.
Thursday, December 24 at 1:00 p.m.

Ticket prices: Start at \$10.50.

Tickets and information: Call (414) 273-7206 or online at www.FirstStage.org.

First Stage Children's Theater is Milwaukee's premier, professional family theater. Founded in 1987, the mission of the company is to provide professional theater productions for young people and their families that engage, enlighten and entertain, Theater Academy training that fosters life skills through stage skills and dynamic in-school education programs that provide learning through theater. First Stage is a member of TYA/USA, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the Wisconsin Alliance for Arts Education and Americans for the Arts, as well as Theatre Wisconsin and Milwaukee Arts Partners, and is a cornerstone member of the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF).

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