



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hope surfaces in a community harboring hatred and bigotry in
First Stage Children's Theater's presentation of

WITNESS

Book by Karen Hesse
Adapted by John Urquhart

Directed by John Maclay

January 23 – February 22, 2009
Todd Wehr Theater, Marcus Center for the Performing Arts

This play is most appreciated by adults, teens and young people ages ten and older.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin (December 29, 2008) - Based on the book by Newberry® Award-winning author Karen Hesse, young friends Leanora and Esther try to bring peace and diversity back into their community during a time of emotional and social upheaval in First Stage Children's Theater's presentation of WITNESS. The show runs January 23 through February 22, 2009 at the Todd Wehr Theater in the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee.

WITNESS tells the story of the Ku Klux Klan's attempt to recruit members in a small Vermont town in the year 1924. Leanora Sutter, a young African-American girl, feels isolated by racial prejudice and her mother's recent death. She is befriended by Esther Hirsh, a younger Jewish girl, whose innocence and natural optimism provides a sharp contrast to the other characters. Leanora and Esther are a source of comfort for each when they find themselves no longer welcome by some of the townspeople.

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Over time, residents of Revelation Falls are affected in many ways by the pressures that build in the community, leading up to a climactic moment of violence. Townsfolk are then forced to recognize and confront the reality of hatred and hostility and, ultimately, stand together for what is right.

“WITNESS is an incredibly well written, intelligent and important piece of theatre,” states director John Maclay. “It starkly examines the cost to a society of allowing hate to fester and offers hope for the future when a community comes together for the good of every citizen.” Maclay goes on to say, “I hope the play reinforces that when a society is faced with hatred, it is the responsibility of all people - whether directly affected or not - to stand up for what is right. The play puts a human face on the danger and evil of racism and anti-Semitism.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, Karen Hesse dreamed of becoming many things: an archaeologist, an ambassador, an actor, an author. From the time she was ten, Karen Hesse thought of herself as "good with words," thanks to a perceptive and supportive fifth grade teacher named Mrs. Datnoff, who believed Hesse could be a professional writer some day. Although Hesse gave up all her other career dreams, she never gave up dreaming of publication. It took more than thirty years, but finally that fifth grade dream came true.

Hesse earned wages as a waitress, a nanny, a librarian, a personnel officer, an agricultural laborer, an advertising secretary, a typesetter, a proofreader, a mental-health-care provider, a substitute teacher, and a book reviewer. In and around the edges of all those jobs, she wrote poems, stories, and many books. The seed for *Out of the Dust* grew out of a picture book idea. Presented with an early draft of the forthcoming picture book, *Come On, Rain* in 1999, a writers group insisted she elaborate on why her characters wanted rain so badly. Hesse began researching times when people desperately wanted rain and *Out of the Dust*, which won her a Newbery Medal in 1998, blossomed into existence.

Hesse states that young readers are the most challenging, demanding, and rewarding of audiences. Adults often ask why write for the younger set. “My reply: I can't think of anyone I'd rather write for.”

Karen Hesse lives in Vermont with her husband and two teenage daughters.

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ARTISTIC STAFF

Director / Associate Artistic Director / Academy Director	John Maclay
Scenic Designer	Nate Stubner
Costume Designer	Pam Rehberg
Lighting Designer / Associate Artist	Jason Fassel
Sound Designer / Associate Artist	Josh Schmidt, USAA

ADULT ACTORS

Johnny Reeves	Michael Cotey
Sara Chickering	Sarah Day*
Percelle Johnson	James Fletcher*
Ira Hirsh	Richard Ganoung*
Olive Harvey	Marcella Kearns
Reynard Alexander	Tom Reed
Mr. Field	Robert Spencer*
Viola Pettibone	Jacque Troy
Harvey Pettibone	Dan Katula

*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers.

YOUNG ACTORS

Leanora Sutter

Esther Hirsh

Doris Hook

Girl #1

Girl #2

Courage Cast

Ishtar Naryawira
Milwaukee

Sydney Salter
Germantown

Nora Papke
Milwaukee

Carrie McNally
Whitefish Bay

Anna Lewein
West Allis

Hope Cast

Olivia Hammernik
Milwaukee

Alexandra Salter
Germantown

Gretchen Mahkorn
Milwaukee

Hayley Carter
Elm Grove

Gena Davis
Hartland

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YOUNG ACTORS (cont.)

Mary Thilbeault

Merlin Van Tornhout

Willie Pettibone

Courage Cast

Emily Daly
Milwaukee

Teddy Warren
Milwaukee

Brett Galaszewski
Greenfield

Hope Cast

Marissa Clayton
Waukesha

Joe Mazza
Oak Creek

Louie Chapman
Shorewood

PERFORMANCE DATES

WITNESS opens Friday, January 23 at 7:00 p.m. in the Todd Wehr Theater at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, 929 N. Water Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The 3:30 p.m. performance on February 22 will be interpreted for hearing-impaired patrons. The full schedule of family performances includes:

Fridays	January 23, February 20	7:00 p.m.
Saturdays	January 31	7:00 p.m.
	February 7	3:30 p.m. & 7:00 p.m.
	February 14	1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
Sundays	January 25, February 22	1:00 & 3:30 P.M.

TICKET INFORMATION

Ticket prices for WITNESS start at \$10.50. Tickets may be purchased online at www.FirstStage.org or through the Marcus Center box office, 414-273-7206, or toll free at 888-612-3500. The number for TDD (for hearing-impaired patrons) is 414-273-3080.

ARTISTIC STAFF

John Maclay (Lake Zurich, IL) – Director / Associate Artistic Director / Academy Director

John has been with First Stage since 2003 and has most recently directed PETER AND THE WOLF, FERDINAND THE BULL, GREEN GABLES, and THE SHAKESPEARE STEALER. John has also directed productions of ROMEO AND JULIET and MACBETH

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for the Young Company, First Stage's pre-professional training program for high school students. As an actor, John has appeared in First Stage's A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD, THE QUILTMAKER'S GIFT, PERSEUS BAYOU, HOLES, and MIKE MULLIGAN AND HIS STEAM SHOVEL. In addition to working at First Stage, John serves as an adjunct faculty member of the UW-Milwaukee theatre department and has taught at Carroll College, Lawrence University, North Central College, and the Interlochen Arts Academy.

Nathan Stuber (Austin, TX) – Scenic Designer

WITNESS marks the first show Nathan has designed North of 794. Previous Milwaukee experiences have included designing and building with Renaissance Theaterworks, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Next Act and Bialystock & Bloom. Although currently living in Austin, Texas, Nathan makes Spring Green, Wisconsin, and American Players Theatre his summer home.

Pamela J. Rehberg (Franksville) – Costume Designer

Pam is happy to return to First Stage after previously designing A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD, HONK! A MIDNIGHT CRY, THE WITCH OF BLACKBIRD POND, TALES OF A FOURTH GRADE NOTHING, GREEN EGGS & HAM, and ZINK: THE MYTH. THE LEGEND. THE ZEBRA. Pam is an associate professor at UW-Milwaukee and teaches courses in draping, pattern making and costume design. Her recent design work includes: PETER AND THE WOLF, for the Milwaukee Ballet Academy, Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra and First Stage collaboration; MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS at Chamber Theatre; and UW-Milwaukee's 1001 and OF MICE AND MEN.

Jason Fassl (Milwaukee) – Lighting Designer / Associate Artist

This is Jason's eleventh production for First Stage Children's Theater. Some of Jason's previous First Stage designs include Harry Connick, Jr.'s THE HAPPY ELF, GOSSAMER, A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD, THE QUILTMAKER'S GIFT, GREEN GABLES, THE SHAKESPEARE STEALER, and A MIDNIGHT CRY. Other lighting designs this season include THE LADY'S NOT FOR BURNING and RUMORS at Peninsula Players, WELL and BROOKLYN BOY at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, LOMBARDI and THE PAVILION at Next Act Theatre, THE PERSIANS and THE TWO OF US at Renaissance Theaterworks, GREATER TUNA and GUYS ON ICE at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and the majority of productions at Fireside Dinner Theater. Jason designs lighting for corporate as well, including productions for The Pampered Chef, Northwestern Mutual, Johnson Controls, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Milwaukee.

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Josh Schmidt, USAA (Mequon) - Sound Designer / Associate Artist

Josh is excited to return to First Stage after previously designing Harry Connick, Jr.'s THE HAPPY ELF, GOSSAMER, A YEAR WITH FROG AND TOAD, THE GIVER, LILLY'S PURPLE PLASTIC PURSE, 12 DAYS - A MILWAUKEE CHRISTMAS, and THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM - 1963, among many others. Recent work includes the successful world premiere and off-Broadway premiere of his first musical THE ADDING MACHINE at Next Theatre Company in Chicago and Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City. Nationally, he has designed at major venues in New York, Washington, D.C., Delaware, California, Texas, Kansas City and Chicago. He is a recipient of the 2003 - 2005 NEA/TCG Career Development Program Award and was named one of nine emerging designers in *Entertainment/Design* magazine in 2004. Upcoming projects include EURYDICE, MAURITIUS, and FARNSWORTH INVENTION at the Alley Theatre, THE TEMPEST at Steppenwolf, HEAVEN'S MY DESTINATION at Cleveland Playhouse, and his next musical, A MINISTER'S WIFE, premiering this summer at Writers Theatre in Glencoe.

ACTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Michael Cotey (Milwaukee) - Johnny Reeves

Michael is excited to be working with First Stage again. Other Milwaukee credits include TWELFTH NIGHT at Milwaukee Shakespeare, COMBAT THEATRE with Bunny Gumbo, and EQUUS at In Tandem Theatre. He also spent the summer performing in TAMING OF THE SHREW and TITUS ANDRONICUS with the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. Michael recently received his BFA in acting from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. University credits include THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE, OF MICE AND MEN, WEST SIDE STORY, THE LIAR, FROM THESE GREEN HEIGHTS, NICKEL AND DIMED, THE LARAMIE PROJECT, INSPECTING CAROL and THE DUMB WAITER, which he also produced and co-directed.

Sarah Day (Spring Green) – Sara Chickering

Sarah is very happy to return to First Stage after last appearing as Miss Emily Brown in James DeVita's 12 DAYS – A MILWAUKEE CHRISTMAS. She has been a member of the acting company at American Players Theatre in Spring Green since 1986, and, last year was honored to play Gertrude Bell in yet another wonderful DeVita play, THE DESERT QUEEN.

James Fletcher (Milwaukee) – Percelle Johnson

James is an actor, director, playwright and producer. He received his BA in theatre from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and his MFA in acting from the Professional

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Theatre Training Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 2000, James co-founded Bunny Gumbo Theatre Company and currently serves as its artistic director. Since moving back from Los Angeles in 1998, James has acted in previous productions with First Stage, in addition to productions with Bialystock and Bloom, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Milwaukee Shakespeare, Renaissance Theatreworks, The Skylight, and the Wisconsin Shakespeare Festival. His plays include THE BIG SCHLEP, BLUE STELLA, GIVE UTMIL IT HURTS, LOSERS, MORE LOSERS, LOVE VERONA STYLE, and a new play entitled THE FOUR HAMLETS.

Richard Ganoung (Madison) – Ira Hirsh

Richard returns to First Stage after appearing in HANA'S SUITCASE last season, and was recently seen in LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST with Milwaukee Shakespeare. In WITNESS, he is happy to have the opportunity to work with many of his "theatrical heroes."

Marcella Kearns (Cudahy) – Olive Harvey

Marcella is thrilled to make her debut with First Stage Children's Theater as Olive Harvey in WITNESS. Marcella's Milwaukee credits include MOON LIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, 2 HENRY IV AND THE COMEDY OF ERRORS at Milwaukee Shakespeare, EQUUS at In Tandem Theatre, and WE WON'T PAY! WE WON'T PAY! at Bialystock & Bloom. Other credits include A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM at Metropolis, ENCORE!! at Chamber Theatre in Boston, MOOSE MATING at Sibiu Festival in Romania, and in Workshop Theatre of South Carolina's GHETTO, KING LEAR, and THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDOR. Marcella holds an MFA from the University of South Carolina and completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Austria.

Tom Reed (Waukesha) – Reynard Alexander

Tom Reed has been a part of the Milwaukee theatre community for the past six years. He has played roles at many of the local theatres, and has had an especially close relationship with First Stage Children's Theater both as an actor and an educator. Before coming to Milwaukee, Tom performed at a variety of regional theatres across the country including the Utah Shakespearean Festival and the Court Theatre in Chicago. Tom earned an MFA in acting from the University of Illinois. During his tenure, Tom was chosen to work on a special project headed by Tony® Award-winning director Daniel Sullivan. This led to his performance in the one man show, HEATHER ON THE HILL at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. Tom is also the creator/writer of INCINERATOR, an original superhero comic book. Apart from his film and theatre endeavors, Tom serves as an instructor in the Theatre Department at Alverno College.

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Robert Spencer (Milwaukee) - Mr. Field

WITNESS marks Robert's debut at First Stage Children's Theater. Robert's Broadway credits include BYE BYE BIRDIE, ENTER LAUGHING, VIA GALACTICA and SEXTET. His off-Broadway shows include THE FANTASTICKS and SING MUSE. He has also appeared in regional theaters throughout the country. Wisconsin credits include American Players Theatre, the Madison Repertory Theatre, Children's Theater of Madison, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Next Act Theatre, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, The Skylight, and Milwaukee Shakespeare.

Jacque Troy (Milwaukee) – Viola Pettibone

Jacque feels very lucky to finally be doing a show under the direction of John Maclay, who she's known and respected for so many years. Jacque is happy to be returning to First Stage after having last appeared in SLEEPING BEAUTY and 12 DAYS – A MILWAUKEE CHRISTMAS. Earlier this season, Jacque enjoyed an exciting run in RABBIT HOLE at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, where she also serves as education director/literary manager. Look for Jacque's performance this spring in the Milwaukee Repertory's Theater's PRIDE AND PREJUDICE.

Dan Katula (Milwaukee) – Harvey Pettibone

Dan is delighted to be returning to First Stage where he has been previously seen in such roles as Santa Clause in THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF SANTA CLAUS, Bob Quimby in RAMONA QUIMBY, and Long John Silver in TREASURE ISLAND. Dan was most recently seen in Renaissance Theaterworks' production of THE PERSIANS. Other work includes co-producing (with Bo Johnson) and creating the puppets for Neil Haven's WHO KILLED SANTA? Dan has also spent several years as lead teacher for First Stage's Summer Academy.

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 the Theater Communications Group, 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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