



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL**

### **returns to First Stage this holiday season!**

*-The horrible Herdmans will make you laugh and melt your heart at the same time-*

**Milwaukee, WI – November 2, 2023** – First Stage is thrilled to announce that **THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL** returns to the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater this holiday season after its smash-hit run in 2018. This hysterically funny and heartwarming musical is based on the play by **Barbara Robinson** and created by the talented husband/wife team of **Jahna Beecham** (Playwright/Lyricist) and **Malcolm Hillgartner** (Composer/Lyricist). The production will be directed and choreographed by First Stage alum and Northern Sky Associate Artistic Director **Molly Rhode**. **THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL** is filled with catchy, ’60s-inspired original music and a delightful story that both young and old will enjoy. The horrible Herdmans are the worst kids in the history of the world. The entire town panics when these rowdy six siblings are cast in the church’s annual Christmas pageant. It’s up to good-hearted Mrs. Bradley to help the Herdmans – and the rest of the town – discover the true meaning of Christmas before it’s too late. Silent night? Not a chance, but sometimes a little joyful noise is just right for Christmas.

**THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL** runs **November 24 – December 24, 2023** at the Marcus Center’s Todd Wehr Theater, located at 929 N. Water Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets start at **\$20** 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](http://firststage.org). *Performance runtime is approximately 75 minutes, which includes a brief intermission. Suggested for adults, teens and children ages 5 – 6, 7 – 9 and 10 – 12.*

Director, Choreographer and First Stage Alum **Molly Rhode** has had a long association with THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER, having played Mindy the narrator in the 1990 version, been the tech intern for the 1992 staging of the play and choreographing both the 2003 and 2009 versions and directing THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL in 2018. When asked what excites her about directing the production again this season she said, “The hugeness of it! The comedy! The joy! It’s such a large show, 29 people in the cast and 22 are young people (44 total with the double casting) so the stage is jam-packed. The energy is infectious. The young people drive the show and they are the stars. . . . Most of the design team and adult actors from 2018 have returned to this year’s production, which is wonderful. It’s like a reunion. But also, several young people have graduated up through the ranks. I have young actors who were sheep in 2018 that have graduated to leading roles this year. It’s a privilege to see these young people grow and thrive and see First Stage’s mission of life skills through stage skills play out before my eyes. Don’t miss it! It might be another five years before it comes around again, and this really is a special one. I promise, you won’t want to miss it!”

Added First Stage Artistic Director **Jeff Frank**: “THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL is a holiday classic and this new musical version was a smash hit when we last brought it to our stage in 2018. Full of big laughs courtesy of the Horrible Herdmans, who stumble into the annual Christmas Pageant hoping for snacks, where they quickly wreak havoc. Yet somehow, they journey from singing “Die Herod Die!” to slowly discovering the true meaning of Christmas, and the community (and the audience) learn to look with fresh eyes as we journey with them. The show will not only make you laugh, but will melt your heart as well. It is a perfect show for the holiday season.”

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**Jahnna Beecham (Playwright/Lyricist)** and **Malcolm Hillgartner (Composer/Lyricist)** met while acting at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, were married onstage at the Empty Space Theatre in Seattle and have been collaborating on things theatrical and literary ever since. Other musicals include DOGPARK, CHAPS! and CHAPS! A JINGLE JANGLE CHRISTMAS, published by Samuel French; HOLMES AND WATSON SAVE THE EMPIRE, THEY CAME FROM WAY OUT THERE and THE DOLL PEOPLE MUSICAL. Under the pen name Jahnna N. Malcolm, they have written 130 books for young adults and children including *The Jewel Kingdom*, *Bad News Ballet* and *Scared Stiff*. They adapted and Jahnna directed the film of their book, *The Ruby Princess Runs Away*, which won Best Picture at the 2001 Burbank International Children’s Film Festival. Their humorous parenting columns for Sesame Street Parents magazine were compiled into a book titled *I’m Counting to 10* and was a Parents Choice Award winner in 2002. Jahnna continues to direct professionally in theatres across the U.S., while Malcolm is an award-winning narrator of over 150 audiobooks. In 2013, they appeared on the stage together as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. They are most proud of their best and brightest collaboration, their son Dash and daughter Skye.

**Molly Rhode (Director and Choreographer)** is a Wisconsin-grown actor/director/choreographer and much of her artistic education took place here at First

Stage. She has a long history with THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER, wearing many hats in five separate productions going back to 1990. She is a very proud former Young Performer and is indebted to the many mentors who she met right here in the Todd Wehr Theater. Her First Stage directing credits include MISS NELSON IS MISSING, ANATOLE, LITTLE CRITTER and THE AMAZING LEMONADE GIRL. Molly is the Associate Artistic Director at Northern Sky Theater in Door County and focuses on the development of new musicals.

**Bill Busch (Music Director)** is thrilled to return to First Stage for this production of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL. He has served as Music Director/Conductor for numerous theatre companies across the Midwest, including Skylight Music Theatre, Children's Theatre of Madison (CTM), Madison Theatre Guild, MATC Theatre, First Stage, Sunset Playhouse and the Marriott Lincolnshire. His directing credits include MOST HAPPY FELLA, WORKING, FULL MONTY, SECRET GARDEN, FINIAN'S RAINBOW, TAP DANCE KID, ANNIE and the world premiere of ANATOLE, here at First Stage. Bill recently retired as Executive Director of Milwaukee Children's Choir and served for 18 years as Director of Music at Hales Corners Lutheran Church. His favorite role is that of father to Emily and Adam and husband to the lovely and talented Rhonda Rae.

### ADULT CAST

**Karen Estrada\*** (Grace Bradley); **Chase Stoeger** (Bob Bradley); **Lachrisa Grandberry\*** (Helen Armstrong); **Laura Gordon\*** (Luanne); **Bree Beelow\*** (Betty); **Cynthia Cobb\*** (Connie) and **J.T. Backes\*** (Reverend).

Understudies: **Kendra Krouth** (Understudy for Karen Estrada); **D. Eric Woolweber** (Understudy for Chase Stoeger); **Sophie Michalski** (Understudy for Lachrisa Grandberry); **Caitlyn Nettesheim** (Understudy for Bree Beelow); **Anya Palmer** (Understudy for Laura Gordon) and **Shayne Steliga** (Understudy for J.T. Backes).

\*Appearing through an Agreement between First Stage and Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

### YOUNG PERFORMER CASTS

Young Performer roles are double cast. Young Performers in the **Kerpow Cast** include: **Terrance Ilion** (Fox Point) as Ralph Herdman; **Lorelei Wesselowski** (Milwaukee) as Imogene Herdman; **Layla Mathias** (Oconomowoc) as Leroy Herdman; **Marlow Kuhn-Grooms** (Shorewood) as Claude Herdman; **Harlow Tobiczky** (Fox Point) as Ollie Herdman; **Mila Rodriguez** (Milwaukee) as Gladys Herdman; **Pietja Dusek** (Elm Grove) as Beth Bradley; **Taylor Arnstein** (Milwaukee) as Alice Wendleken; **Lauren DeGroot** (Menomonee Falls) as Ivy Reed; **Silvia Stoeger** (Milwaukee) as Charlie Bradley; **Collin Wiese** (Wauwatosa) as Elmer Hopkins; **Sam Dusek** (Elm Grove) as Teddy Shoemaker; **Sofia Kubacki** (Milwaukee) as Pageant Narrator; **Olivia Schmitz** (Port Washington) as Ensemble Angel Choir; **Summer Laster** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Angel Choir; **Elise Fischer** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Angel Choir;

**Thought Grant** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Shepherd; **Will Perkins** (Shorewood) as Ensemble Camel; **Tegan Stadler** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Sheep; **Finley Brown** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Sheep; **Diana Quindel** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Sheep; and **Annabelle Miller** (Mequon) as Ensemble Sheep.

Young Performers in the **Shazaam Cast** include: **John Eash-Scott** (Wauwatosa) as Ralph Herdman; **Maya O'Day Biddle** (Milwaukee) as Imogene Herdman; **Grant Schoonover** (Muskego) as Leroy Herdman; **Lucia Harris** (Fox Point) as Claude Herdman; **Rocio Del Mar Berrios** (Mount Pleasant) as Ollie Herdman; **Evianna Gibbons** (Delafield) as Gladys Herdman; **Maia Scherman** (Grafton) as Beth Bradley; **Niamh Mayne** (Elm Grove) as Alice Wendleken; **Makayla Lloyd** (Milwaukee) as Ivy Reed; **Bennett Schoonover** (Muskego) as Charlie Bradley; **Penny Whitmore** (Milwaukee) as Elmer Hopkins; **Milo Eull** (Elm Grove) as Teddy Shoemaker; **Tessa Imes Benischek** (Hartland) as Pageant Narrator; **Helen Paloma Marotta** (Shorewood) as Ensemble Angel Choir; **Taylor Burks** (Franklin) as Ensemble Angel Choir; **Cece Harris** (Fox Point) as Ensemble Shepherd; **Caroline Kanter** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Shepherd; **Tobias Imes Benischek** (Hartland) as Ensemble Camel; **Kendall Milazzo** (New Berlin) as Ensemble Sheep; **Alice Nguyen** (Milwaukee) as Ensemble Sheep; **Flora Foulard** (Shorewood) as Ensemble Sheep and **Willow Milligan** (Saint Francis) as Ensemble Sheep.

Please note: To find which cast is performing on a specific performance date and time, please refer to the website on the show page located here: [THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL](#).

The Artistic and Creative Team for **THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL** includes: **Molly Rhode** (Director and Choreographer); **Kristin Ellert** (Scenic Designer); **Daryl Harris** (Costume Designer); **Erica Lauren Maholmes, USA** (Lighting Designer); **Matt Whitmore** (Sound Designer); **Bill Busch** (Music Director); **James Carrington** (Assistant Director), **Lyndsey Kuhlmann** (Assistant Costume Designer) and **Kelly L. Schwartz\*** (Production Stage Manager); **Lauren Westfahl** (Assistant Stage Manager) and **Aminah Rockett** (Assistant Stage Manager).

\*Appearing through an Agreement between First Stage and Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

**Tickets start at \$20** – Tickets may be purchased at [firststage.org](http://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.

**Security at the Marcus Performing Arts Center:** Upon entry to the Todd Wehr Theater, attendees will walk through a security scanner to check for any items not permitted in the building. While purses and small bags are allowed, please leave larger bags, backpacks or other items at home. [Review Security Procedures at the Marcus Performing Arts Center](#). Please allow ample time for parking and security checks before the performance.

**Digital Playbill:** The digital playbill includes artistic/actor/designer and cast bios. To view the digital playbill when it gets posted closer to the show opening, please go to: [firststage.org/about-us/media-center/playbills/](https://firststage.org/about-us/media-center/playbills/)

**Please note:** Please refer to the digital playbill for updates on any cast changes as well as for the appropriate pronouns for actors.

**Enrichment Guide:** An Enrichment Guide for the production will get posted here: [THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL](#)

**Group Sales:** Groups of 10 or more receive 15% off single ticket prices on most First Stage performances at the Marcus Center's Todd Wehr Theater. Call **(414) 267-2961** or email [ticketmanager@firststage.org](mailto:ticketmanager@firststage.org) for more information.

Here is a Google drive link which includes the show logo, director's headshot as well as photos from First Stage's 2018 production A BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL:

[drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JprGDFo4KLnWZbc5qz\\_OE8RwTjr55GDy?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JprGDFo4KLnWZbc5qz_OE8RwTjr55GDy?usp=drive_link)

### **Special events for THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL**

#### **Pay What You Choose Performance: Thursday, November 30, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.**

Pay What You Choose tickets are available on a first come, first served basis with a minimum suggested ticket price of \$10 per person. Doors open at 6:00 p.m. on the day of the performance. Patrons are encouraged to arrive early. Tickets may also be reserved in advance by phone at **(414) 267-2961**, weekdays 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. For more information, please visit: [firststage.org/events-tickets/tickets-offers/pay-what-you-choose/](https://firststage.org/events-tickets/tickets-offers/pay-what-you-choose/).

#### **Sensory Friendly Performance: Saturday, December 9, 2023 at 3:30 p.m.**

A Sensory Friendly Performance with accommodations for families with children on the autism spectrum will take place on Saturday, December 9, 2023 at 3:30 p.m. Sensory accommodations include a quiet area staffed by an experienced educator, adjusted sound and lighting, and more. Tickets for Sensory Friendly Performances are \$10. Order online or 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/](https://firststage.org/plan-your-visit/sensory-friendly-performances/).

#### **Grandparent Holiday Brunch: Sunday, December 10 before the 1:00 p.m. performance of THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL**

Gather the entire family and join First Stage for a festive holiday brunch before the 1 p.m. performance of [THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL](#) on **Sunday, December 10, 2023**. The brunch will be held at the Marcus Performing Arts Center in the Bradley Pavilion located at 929 N. Water Street. Registration is from 11:00 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. The brunch will begin at 11:30 a.m. Tickets are \$65 for adults and \$45 for children 12 and under, which includes a delicious pancake breakfast buffet, holiday-themed activities and a delightful sneak peek of

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL, plus a ticket to the show. For patrons that already have their performance tickets, admission for the Grandparent Holiday Brunch is \$50 for adults and \$30 for children 12 and under. To learn more or to register, please visit [Grandparent Holiday Brunch](#).

**ASL Interpreted Performance: Sunday, December 17, 2023 at 3:30 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. To learn more, please visit: [firststage.org/plan-your-visit/accessibility/sign-language-interpreted-performances/](http://firststage.org/plan-your-visit/accessibility/sign-language-interpreted-performances/)

## **FACT SHEET**

**Title: THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER: THE MUSICAL**

Book and Lyrics by **Jahnna Beecham**  
Music & Lyrics by **Malcolm Hillgartner**  
Based on the Play by **Barbara Robinson**

*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever: The Musical* is presented by special arrangement with Broadway Licensing, LLC. ([www.broadwaylicensing.com](http://www.broadwaylicensing.com)).

Directed and choreographed by **Molly Rhode**

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

**Live Performances: November 24 – December 24, 2023**

**Description:** The horrible Herdmans are the worst kids in the history of the world. The entire town panics when these rowdy six siblings are cast in the church's annual Christmas pageant. It's up to good-hearted Mrs. Bradley to help the Herdmans – and the rest of the town – discover the true meaning of Christmas before it's too late. Silent night? Not a chance, but sometimes a little joyful noise is just right for Christmas. *Performance runtime is approximately 75 minutes, which includes a brief intermission. Suggested for adults, teens and children ages 5 – 6, 7 – 9 and 10 – 12.*

**Performances:**

- Friday, November 24 at 1:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m. – *OPENING PERFORMANCES*
- Saturday, November 25 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
- Sunday, November 26 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
- Thursday, November 30 at 7:00 p.m. – *PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE PERFORMANCE*
- Friday, December 1 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 2 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
- Sunday, December 3 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.

- Friday, December 8 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 9 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m. – *SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE AT 3:30 P.M.*
- Sunday, December 10 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m. – *GRANDPARENT HOLIDAY BRUNCH BEFORE 1:00 P.M. PERFORMANCE*
- Friday, December 15 at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 16 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
- Sunday, December 17 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m. – *ASL PERFORMANCE AT 3:30 P.M.*
- Wednesday, December 20 at 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, December 21 at 7:00 p.m.
- Friday, December 22 at 1:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, December 23 at 1:00 p.m. & 3:30 p.m.
- Sunday, December 24 at 1:00 p.m.

For more information, please visit [firststage.org](http://firststage.org) or call (414) 267-2961.

### **About First Stage**

Founded in 1987, First Stage is one of the nation's leading theaters for young people and families, and a driving force behind the creation of the best and most innovative plays for family audiences, theater training programs for young people, and education initiatives for its schools and community.

First Stage produces plays that honor the young person's point of view, include diverse and traditionally underrepresented voices and inspire meaningful conversations. First Stage has presented more than 70 world premiere productions that address important subject matters relevant to today's youth. The Theater Academy is one of the nation's largest high-impact theater training programs for young people (3-18 years old). Through a challenging curriculum taught by professional teaching artists, the Academy nurtures life skills through stage skills and includes the Next Steps Program that tailors Theater Academy classes to the needs of autistic young people. As Wisconsin's leader in arts-integrated education in schools, First Stage's dynamic Theater in Education Programs cleverly blend theater activities with standard curriculum – allowing more than 10,000 students annually to learn traditional academic subjects through creativity and self-expression.

First Stage ensures that all programming is not only accessible to its community but that it is reflective of the community it serves. In order to do that, First Stage relies on its community of donors. With an annual operating budget of \$5 million, more than half of First Stage's revenue comes from generous contributions from individuals, corporations, foundations, government sources and the United Performing Arts Fund. Join First Stage's community of donors with [a contribution today](#) and transform lives through theater.

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](http://firststage.org)