



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**A fun-filled, friendship-packed musical**  
**ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN PLAY!"**  
**comes to Milwaukee Youth Arts Center this month**

*-Real-life friends James Carrington and Rachael Zientek reprise their charming roles as Gerald and Piggie-*

**Milwaukee, WI – February 9, 2023** – First Stage is delighted to announce the return of **ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN PLAY!"**, a rollicking musical adventure written by **Mo Willems** (Book and Lyrics) and based on his award-winning *Elephant & Piggie* children's books. The play will be directed and choreographed by First Stage Associate Artistic Director **Michelle LoRizzo**, with music by **Deborah Wicks La Puma** and music direction by **Jonathon Gideon**. The production was a First Stage hit during the 2019/20 season. When Gerald the Elephant and Piggie the Pig get together, anything is possible! The delightful relationship between these two pals and their devotion to each other through ups and downs will remind audiences of how good it feels to put friends first. Attendees should bring their "bestus" friends and share in all of the pachydermal peril and swiney suspense on stage as Mo Willems' cherished characters make the leap from page to stage. Sponsored by **PNC**.

**ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!"** runs **February 24 – March 24, 2024** in the newly renovated, theater-in-the-round Goodman Mainstage Hall, **Milwaukee Youth Arts Center**, located at 325 W. Walnut Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets start at \$22. Tickets are available online at [firststage.org](http://firststage.org) or through the First Stage Box Office at **(414) 267-2961**. *Performance run time is approximately 60 minutes with no intermission. Suggested for adults, teens and children ages 3 – 4, 5 – 6 and 7 – 9. (Please note: Many performances have extremely limited availability, so audience members are encouraged to order tickets soon.)*

Associate Artistic Director/Director **Michelle LoRicco** had this to say about the play: “ELEPHANT & PIGGIE’S “WE ARE IN A PLAY!” is fun-filled, friendship-packed musical that combines some of our favorite Piggie and Gerald moments from Mo Willems’ hilarious series. To honor the theme of friendship, First Stage welcomes back real-life besties, James Carrington and Rachael Zientek, to reprise their roles.

Why this show now? Gerald presents worries that do come up in our complicated world. His anxiety is incredibly relatable. With health crises, severe weather conditions and economic pressures impacting our ever day life, young people can’t help but be impacted by the state of our world. It can be overwhelming and terrifying. Our friendships are the balance in an imbalanced world.

Gerald at one point in the play asks: “I wondered what friendship meant.” Navigating relationships is a human journey that we all face throughout our lives. Although conflicts can seem more complex as we get older, the consequence of losing a friend means just as much, if not more to a young person. Some people make friends easily, but others struggle to connect. Piggie is Gerald’s gateway to seeing the world as a place where there is so much fun to be had, NOT a place to be afraid of. I hope that First Stage audiences will be inspired by the beautiful message in this play and will enjoy the delightful antics of Gerald and Piggie as they discover the true meaning of friendship. As Piggie and Gerald remind us: “No matter what, if you’ve got a pal, you’ve got a lot.”

From Artistic Director **Jeff Frank**: “We’re thrilled to welcome back Elephant and Piggie to First Stage in our newly renovated Goodman Mainstage Hall at the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center! Mo Willems is unrivaled in his writing for young audiences, having created some of the most amazing characters and stories – and Elephant and Piggie and their unexpected, beautiful friendship are certainly at the pinnacle of his work. Paired with composer and First Stage friend Deborah Wicks La Puma (ELLA ENCHANTED, UNMUTED), they have created a fast-paced and fun vaudevillian-style musical for our youngest audience members and their families. Joined by the Squirrelles and some surprise appearances from a few other folks, they sing and dance their way into our hearts while exploring the trials and tribulations of being “bestus” friends.”

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**Mo Willems (Playwright)** is an author, illustrator, animator and playwright. He was the inaugural Kennedy Center Education Artist-in-Residence (2019 – 2022), and he continues to collaborate in creating fun new stuff involving classical music, opera, comedy concerts, dance, painting and digital works with the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington National Opera, Ben Folds, Yo-Yo Ma and others. Willems is best known for his #1 New York Times bestselling picture books, which have been awarded three Caldecott Honors (*Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*; *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*; *Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity*), and his celebrated Elephant and Piggie early reader series, which has been awarded two Theodor Geisel Medals and five Geisel Honors.

Mo's art has been exhibited around the world, including major solo retrospectives at the High Museum (Atlanta) and the New-York Historical Society (NYC). Over the last decade, Willems has become the most produced playwright of Theater for Young Audiences in America, having written or co-written four musicals based on his books.

He began his career as a writer and animator on PBS' *Sesame Street*, where he garnered six Emmy Awards (writing). Other television work includes two series on Cartoon Network: *Sheep in the Big City* (creator + head writer) and *Codename: Kids Next Door* (head writer). Mo's recent TV projects include the live action-comedy special *Don't Let the Pigeon Do Storytime!* and an animated rock opera special based on *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed*, which originally premiered on HBO Max. In April 2023, Mo will celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* with the publication of *Be the Bus: The Lost & Profound Wisdom of The Pigeon* (Union Square Kids, April 4, 2023), a humor book for adults and *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! 20th Anniversary Edition* (Hyperion Books for Children, April 4, 2023) including an exclusive board game. His papers reside at Yale University's Beinecke Library.

[mowillemsworkshop.com/bio](http://mowillemsworkshop.com/bio)

**Michelle LoRizzo (Associate Artistic Director/Director)** is a proud Puerto Rican from Orlando, FL. She is an educator, director and playwright who loves to create stories on stage and in the classroom with people of all ages. Michelle graduated from the University of Central Florida with her MFA, specializing in Theatre for Young Audiences and received her bachelor's degree in Theatre, specializing in Musical Theatre, at Palm Beach Atlantic University. She has worked as Education Associate at Mill Mountain Theatre and in the Education Departments of the American Repertory Theatre, The Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, Orlando Family Stage and other non-profit organizations. She also spent three years in the classroom, as the Theatre Program Director for Patrick Henry High School. As a playwright, Michelle was a finalist in Childsplay's 2019 Write Now Competition with her play *When Coquis Sing*, and she has been commissioned to write plays for Endstation Theatre, Orlando Family Stage and Virginia Children's Theater. Michelle is thrilled to be so warmly welcomed to Milwaukee; and she cannot wait to continue making opportunities for local and emerging artists through her work at First Stage.

**Jonathan Gideon (Music Director)** is a Milwaukee-based theatre artist. He holds a BA in music with a theatre minor from Concordia University Wisconsin. From 2019 – 2022 Jonathon worked as a resident actor, music director and composer with Kohl's Wild Theater, a touring repertory theatre for young audiences. Jonathon previously worked with First Stage as an understudy for THE LEGEND OF ROCK PAPER SCISSORS, ARTHUR™ AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL!, RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL and THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES. With the First Stage Theater Academy, Jonathon has taught acting and musical theatre courses; he also music directed the NEWSIES JR. and SEUSSICAL JR. performance experiences. Other music directing credits include ORPHIE AND THE BOOK OF HEROES, GUYS AND DOLLS and ONCE ON THIS ISLAND. In addition to his work in theatre, Jonathon serves as the Minister of Music at Kingo Lutheran Church in Shorewood. He also works as the assistant

general manager at Game Show Battle Rooms in Brookfield and the general manager of Virtual Game Show Battle Rooms.

### **ADULT CAST**

**James Carrington\*** (Elephant aka Gerald); and **Rachael Zientek\*** (Piggie). Understudy for James Carrington is **Connor Nekich**. Understudy for Rachael Zientek is **Sarah Zapiain**.

\*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 **Oink Cast** include: **Emma Hipp** (Oak Creek) as Squirrelle; **Evie Maassen** (Elm Grove) as Squirrelle; **Grace Nealy** (Brookfield) as Squirrelle; **Allison Hartberg** (Viroqua) as Squirrelle; **Jule Schloemer** (Brookfield) as Dog and **Valentina Vega** (Milwaukee) as Penguin.

Young Performers in the **Trumpet Cast** include: **Zoah Hirano** (Shorewood) a Squirrelle; **Alexandria Kutz** (Lake Mills) as Squirrelle; **Amelia Sajdak** (Wauwatosa) as Squirrelle; **Savannah Carlson** (Mequon) as Squirrelle; **Dayeliz Richardson** (Milwaukee) as Dog and **Jillian Vodeges** (Milwaukee) as Penguin.

### **ARTISTIC & CREATIVE TEAM**

The Artistic & Creative Team for **ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!"**: includes **Michelle LoRizzo** (Associate Artistic Director/Director/Choreographer); **Jonathon Gideon** (Music Director); **Em Allen** (Scenic Designer); **Lyndsey Kuhlmann** (Costume Designer); **Shane O'Neil** (Lighting Designer); **Derek Buckles** (Sound Designer); **James Carrington\*** (Dance Captain); **Kelsey York\*** (Stage Manager) and **Lauren Westfahl** (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 \$22** – Tickets may be purchased at [firststage.org](http://firststage.org) or by phone **(414) 267-2961**.

**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/](http://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.

Here is a Google drive with production photos from the 2019/20 production of **ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!"**:

[drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Mg7da8E7huyepFujy5jTCLiH8LUBYKnh?usp=drive link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Mg7da8E7huyepFujy5jTCLiH8LUBYKnh?usp=drive_link)

**Special events for ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!":**

**Pay What You Choose Performance: Friday, March 1, 2024 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. To learn more 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, March 9, 2024 at 1:00 p.m.**

A Sensory Friendly Performance with accommodations for families with children on the autism spectrum will take place on **Saturday, March 9** at 1:00 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/)

**Tech Talk: Sunday, March 10, 2024 following the 1:00 p.m. performance**

Stick around following select performances for First Stage Tech Talks, an extended talkback featuring special guests to give audiences a glimpse at the behind-the-scenes magic of First Stage productions. This Tech Talk will feature special guest Scenic Designer **Em Allen**.

**ASL Interpreted Performance: Sunday, March 17, 2024 at 1:00 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 Milwaukee Youth Arts Center. To learn more, please visit: [firststage.org/plan-your-visit/accessibility/sign-language-interpreted-performances/](https://firststage.org/plan-your-visit/accessibility/sign-language-interpreted-performances/)

**FACT SHEET**

**Title: ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!"**

Based on the Elephant & Piggie books by **Mo Willems**

Published by Hyperion Books for Children

Book and lyrics by **Mo Willems**

Music by **Deborah Wicks La Puma**

*This play was commissioned by and first produced at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.*

*ELEPHANT & PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY" is presented through special arrangement with Music Theatre International (MTI). All authorized performance materials are also supplied by MTI. [www.mtishows.com](http://www.mtishows.com)*

Directed and Choreographed by **Michelle LoRicco**

Sponsored by **PNC**

**Location:** Goodman Mainstage Hall, Milwaukee Youth Arts Center, 325 W. Walnut Street, Milwaukee

**Live Performances: February 24 – March 24, 2024**

**Description:** When Elephant Gerald and Piggie the Pig get together, anything is possible. These two pals and their devotion to each other through ups and downs will remind you of how good it feels to put friends first. Bring your “bestus” friends and share in all of the pachydermal peril and swiney suspense as Mo Willems’ cherished characters make the leap from page to stage in this rollicking musical adventure. *Performance run time is approximately 60 minutes with no intermission. Suggested for adults, teens and children ages 3 – 4, 5 – 6 and 7 – 9.*

**Performances:**

- Saturday, February 24 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 p.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Sunday, February 25 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 p.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Friday, March 1 at 7:00 p.m. – **PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE PERFORMANCE – TICKETS AVAILABLE**
- Saturday, March 2 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 p.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Sunday, March 3 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 p.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Saturday, March 9 at 11:00 a.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Saturday, March 9 at 1:00 p.m. – **SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE – LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Sunday, March 10 at 11:00 a.m. – **TICKETS AVAILABLE**
- Sunday, March 10 at 1:00 p.m. – **TECH TALK – LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Saturday, March 16 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Sunday, March 17 at 11:00 a.m. – **TICKETS AVAILABLE**
- Sunday, March 17 at 1:00 p.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Saturday, March 23 at 11:00 a.m. – **LIMITED AVAILABILITY**
- Saturday, March 23 at 1:00 p.m. – **TICKETS AVAILABLE**
- Sunday, March 24 at 11:00 a.m. & 1:00 p.m. – **TICKETS AVAILABLE**

**Ticket and information:** Tickets start at \$22. Call (414) 267-2961 or online at: [firststage.org](http://firststage.org)

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## **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)