



**FORWARD
THEATER CO.**

*Annual Report
& Season Highlights*

From the Artistic Director:

How can we begin to express how grateful we feel to be leading this theater company, even considering how daunting the task has seemed during these past few years? We are, indeed, deeply grateful - to our audiences, to our funders, to our artists—to all our partners in creating theater that is of, by, and for this community. Theater is, above all, a **communal** endeavor.

The act of experiencing a piece of art, however, is **deeply** personal—and we all come to the theater looking for different things. Entertainment, provocation, catharsis, escape, a good laugh, a good cry, a chance to gather with friends: all these things can be found in the Playhouse in the course of our seasons, and we always hope you'll find some of what **you're** looking for when you are with us.

The best part of this Forward Theater community is the knowledge that we are in an ongoing dialogue with all of you. You talk to us in the lobby before performances, engage with us in post-show talkbacks, send us emails with your thoughts on a show, post your feelings online...“funny and profound” (*Mom, How Did You Meet The Beatles?*), “just what we need right now” (*The Amateurs*), “one of the best” (*The Mytilenean Debate*), “off-the-charts amazing” (*Russian Troll Farm*). Each of these productions played a crucial role in our efforts to celebrate new voices, attract new audiences, and build new community connections as we look to our shared future. We are excited to continue this journey alongside you over the years ahead.



Jen Uphoff Gray



From the Managing Director:

When most of the world shut down in March 2020, Forward Theater never stopped producing plays and offering content to our patrons. We produced a completely digital season in 2020–2021, and then we welcomed audiences back to the Playhouse in 2021–2022 (while providing a filmed alternative for those not yet ready to come back in person). Most of our subscribers stuck with us throughout this unpredictable time, and single ticket buyers now appear to be dipping their toes back in the proverbial water (aka live theater!).

Despite lower ticket sales compared to our pre-pandemic numbers, our 2021–2022 season still ended “in the black” due to increased donations from our generous supporters, and, most significantly, one-time federal support via PPP loans and a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant. This government funding has come to an end at a particularly precarious time, as our expenses have increased dramatically. Not only are we still COVID-testing our actors and crew at least twice weekly, but costs for our physical productions are also way up. You know that kitchen remodel that is now costing about 10–25% more, due to inflation and supply chain issues? Those are the same materials we use to build our sets and we’re always on a tight deadline!

But do not fret. Because of the generosity of our donors, and their recognition of the value Forward Theater adds to our community, we are committed to continuing to produce the high-quality theater that you have come to expect from us. We won’t decrease our production values, we won’t cut back on our mission of employing Wisconsin’s professional theater artists, and we won’t stop providing you with heartfelt, thoughtful, and enjoyable experiences. See you at the theater!



Julie Swenson

“Thank you for continuing to bring amazing professional theater to Madison...Forward Theater is one of the best parts of living in this area.”

—Steve Frye

Julie Swenson, Managing Director & Jen Uphoff Gray, Artistic Director (from L)
Photo: Samara Safarik

Cover Image: Josh Krause, Olivia Dawson, Marti Gobel, Casem Abulughod, and Sarah Day (clockwise from L)
All production photos: Ross Zentner



Marti Gobel and Jamaica Gobel in *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*

“To put it mildly, *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?* was a bold choice for Forward Theater.... [Kennedy’s] work is often shelved among the celebrated and influential ranks who are rarely produced... Cultural institutions are the amplifiers to the way society is moving....I was fortunate to work with a theater organization that takes its job very seriously to make the theater more democratic, more inclusive, more accessible and more antiracist.”

—Baron Kelly, director

Nevertheless...

Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?

marked Forward Theater’s return to the Playhouse for our first live run since closing *Every Brilliant Thing* in February 2020. Forward was the first company to resume public performances at the Overture Center, and we led the way in establishing health and safety protocols for audiences and artists.

Co-written by legendary American playwright Adrienne Kennedy with her son Adam P. Kennedy, Forward’s production of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?* was directed by Dr. Baron Kelly (Professor of Theatre at the UW-Madison), and starred the real-life mother-and-son duo Marti Gobel & Jamaica Gobel.

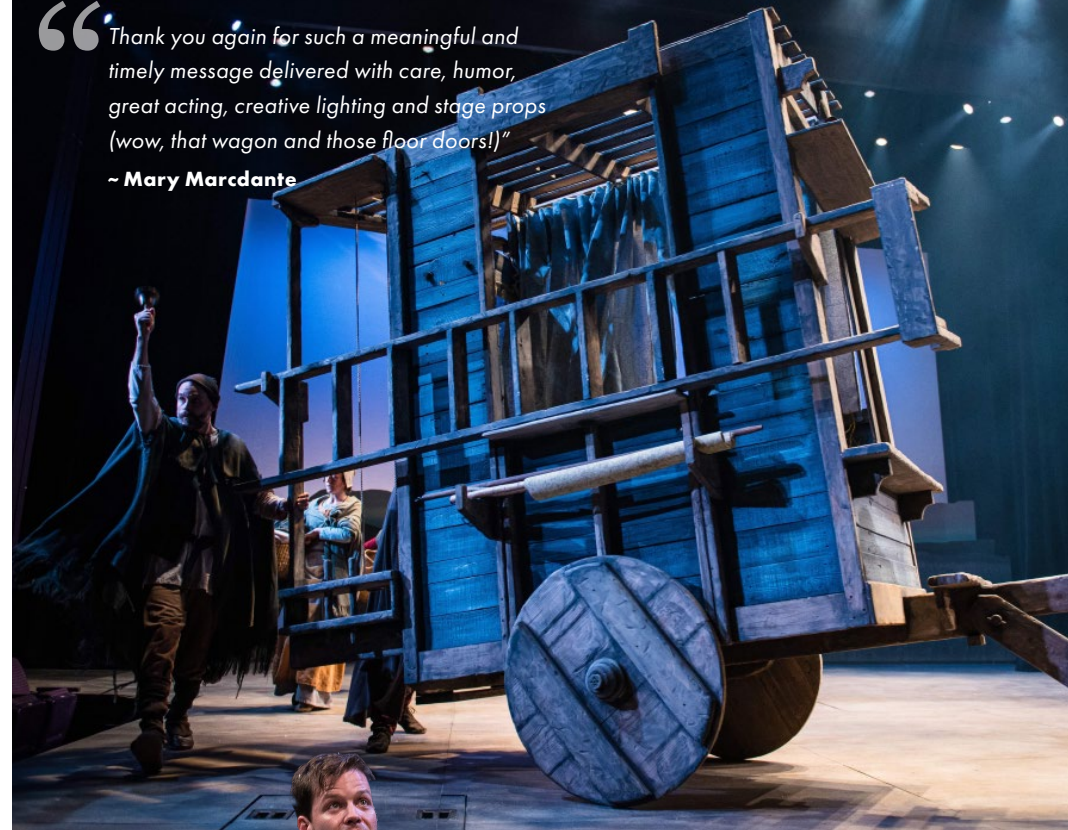
During our run of *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*, dramaturg Khalid Y. Long of Columbia College put together a symposium with topics offering a deeper dive into Adrienne Kennedy’s work (with Sandra Adell, La Donna Forsgren, and Nicole Hodges Persley), the culture of the 1960’s (with Donald Gagnon and Christen Mandracchia), and the tradition of Black women and autobiographical writing (with Omiyemi Green and Joanne Braxton). Each discussion was held virtually and was free to the public.

Long also spoke with co-playwright Adam P. Kennedy in a public forum as part of the Cap Times Idea Fest.



“Thank you again for such a meaningful and timely message delivered with care, humor, great acting, creative lighting and stage props (wow, that wagon and those floor doors!)”

~ Mary Marcdante



Josh Krause & Ty Fanning in *The Amateurs*. (from L)

Matt Daniels and Bessie the Cart in *The Amateurs*

The Amateurs

What a dream it was to finally be able to share *The Amateurs* with our audiences after having to cancel our March 2020 production before opening night. A Wisconsin Premiere of this exciting script, Forward’s production was a reunion of sorts for the actors and crew who began work on the play 18 months earlier. The fact that *The Amateurs* is a play about a troupe of actors outrunning the Plague in medieval Europe made this reunion even more resonant.

During the run of *The Amateurs*, we offered a free lecture series expanding on the play’s themes. Topics included: “The History of AIDS in Madison” with local legend Dick Wagner, “Traditions of Medieval Theater” with UW Professor Martin Foys, and “The Macabre and the Performance of Death” with UW Professor Thomas Dale. These lectures were offered in person, but also filmed for viewing on our website.





The Mytilenean Debate

A highlight of the season was our world premiere of *The Mytilenean Debate* by local playwright (and Forward Theater writer-in-residence) Quan Barry. Directed by Mark H., *The Mytilenean Debate* was first developed in our 2020 Wisconsin Wrights New Play Festival, and we were thrilled to shepherd this new work to a full production.

Public programming surrounding our production included a Wisconsin Book Festival event with readings by Quan Barry from her newest novel and a performance by Gavin Lawrence and Olivia Dawson of a scene from the play. In addition, Barry spoke with Brian James Polak on the Playhouse stage for a live recording of "The Subtext" (a national podcast hosted by the Theatre Communications Group) about her writing and career.



Top: Gavin Lawrence in *The Mytilenean Debate*
 Middle: Marcus Truschinski and Gavin Lawrence in *The Mytilenean Debate*
 Below: Olivia Dawson in *The Mytilenean Debate*



Top: Andrew Rathgeber and Casem Abulughod in *Russian Troll Farm* (from L)
 Middle: Scott Haden and Cassandra Bissell in *Russian Troll Farm* (from L)

“Season ticket holder for many years and always enjoy the selections [of Forward Theater]... but this one really is a standout!”
 — Mary Seibel



The cast and crew of *Russian Troll Farm*

Russian Troll Farm

Our final mainstage production of the season was *Russian Troll Farm: A Workplace Comedy*. Ours was the first staged production of this script (that had debuted as a piece of Zoom theater in 2020). We invited playwright Sarah Gancher to spend time with us in Madison, working with our team and putting final touches on her play before it opened to its first live audience.

Universally relatable as a workplace comedy, this play also touched on more sinister elements of social media manipulation. The interactive “Spot the Troll” quiz offered in our lobby shed

light on how pervasive misinformation is online. If you’re curious to know how YOU would do, take the quiz now by using this QR code!



With our production taking place during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we raised funds during our run for World Central Kitchen, in support of their work with Ukrainian refugees.



“How lovely it was to see myself and my experiences reflected on stage.”
 — Dana Pellebon

Wisconsin Wrights

Forward Theater's biennial Wisconsin Wrights New Play Festival took place in May 2022 at Edgewood College. Three new plays were selected from the 37 submissions we received from Wisconsin playwrights. The chosen writers were invited to Madison for a weeklong rehearsal process with a professional cast, director, dramaturg, and stage manager. These culminated in staged readings in front of live audiences.

Through Wisconsin Wrights Forward provides invaluable developmental experiences for playwrights and paid work for scores of local artists. Our new partnership with Edgewood College also created learning opportunities for student interns hired to support the festival.

2022 WISCONSIN WRIGHTS PLAYS:

Viragos—A Play with Found Text

by **Katherine E. Norman (Madison)**

Civil Union

by **Amy Hanson (Racine)**

Lifers

by **Quan Barry (Madison)**



Jen Uphoff Gray, Lauren Gunderson and Samara Safarik with the rest of the *Artemisia* team at Wisconsin Wrights.

Artemisia sneak peak

During our Festival we also presented a staged reading of our newly-commissioned play *Artemisia*, by acclaimed author Lauren Gunderson. Audiences got a sneak peek at the development of this piece which will be mounted in the Playhouse in spring 2023.



Kat Wodtke, James Carrington, Emily Glick, and Josh Krause in *The Amateurs*.

The in-person theater experience is back...

Preshow Lectures

every Thursday and Sunday (also available online)

Talkbacks

after every performance

“Being a part of Forward Theater is one of the great joys of my life as a working theater artist in the state of Wisconsin. Forward has given me the opportunity to work on incredibly timely and important plays. From our very first full production...Christopher Durang's *Why Torture is Wrong*, and the *People Who Love Them to Russian Troll Farm*...I have been given the chance to explore these brand-new plays that speak directly to the present day. It has allowed me to learn, to grow and to expand my horizons...no one could ask for more.”

—**Sarah Day**, (right) Actor and founding member of Forward's Advisory Company



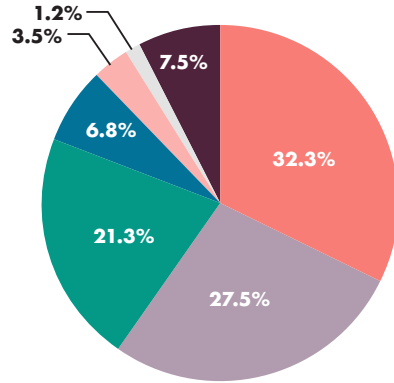
You Supported Us...

Income: \$1,401,094

- Ticket Sales
- Individual Contributions
- Government Support*
- Foundation Support
- Events**
- Investments
- Corporate Support

*One-time only COVID relief. Government Support is typically just 1-2% of our annual income.

**Game night only

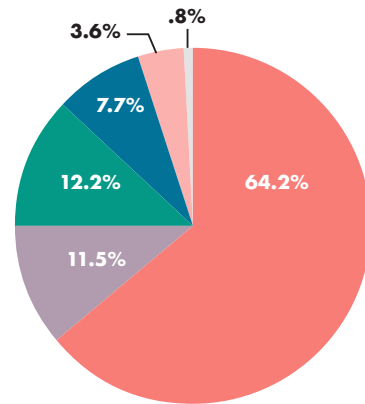


Artists Got Paid...

Expenses: \$1,314,314

- **PEOPLE** Artists, Production Personnel, Staff & Benefits, Community Connections, and Playwright Royalties
- **OPERATIONS** Office Space Rental, Office Supplies, Insurance, Financial Services, and Organizational Memberships
- **VENUE** Theater Rental, Rehearsal Space Rental, Security, and Box Office Fees
- **MARKETING/DEVELOPMENT** Advertising, Graphic Design, and Donor Engagement
- **PRODUCTIONS** Sets, Costumes, Lighting, Props, Sound, and Playbills
- **COMPANY EXPENSES** Artist Housing, Hospitality, and COVID Safety

*Expenses for the season were significantly impacted by COVID-related costs, inflation, and supply chain issues.



We are serving our community in more and more ways...

2022 Accessibility Plan

Designed to provide a truly accessible theater experience, we built a plan with four key elements: Internal Investigation, Services, Relationships, Intersectionality. Our first initiative was to provide ASL Interpretation for every Forward production, starting in Spring 2022. With premium, unobstructed seating and mindful pricing, we're a step closer to that goal. New initiatives will continue into 2023 and beyond.

Discounted Tickets

Forward provided over **11,000 free or discounted tickets** to students, nonprofits, educators, groups, and artists.

Game Night is Back!

We welcomed 152 bingo-lovers back to the Goodman Center after a pandemic pause and raised over **\$14,000!**

Forward Podcast

This season our podcast covered timely and wide-ranging topics like *The Talkback Strikes Back: the merits and pitfalls of talkbacks in the theater*; *The Hamilton Debacle: Copyrights, Licensing Laws, and Artists' Rights*; and *Are New Plays an Endangered Species?*



Community Partners

Collaboration with our community is key to our mission. From hosting events to providing comp tickets, from mentorship to digital screenings, this is just a partial list of why we are better together.

“Thank you very much for sharing your plan towards Anti-racism and EDI within the company. Your efforts are laudable and we feel proud to be season ticket holders.”

—Ruth & Paul Meyer
(Subscribers since 2012)

COMMUNITY & NON-PROFIT PARTNERS

- 2021 Wisconsin Leadership Summit
- Art + Lit Lab
- Bradley Learning Center
- Cap Times Idea Fest
- Capitol Lakes
- Dane Buy Local
- Downtown Madison Inc
- Downtown Rotary
- Foundation for Madison's Public Schools
- LaFollette High School Drama Dept (Adopt-A-School Program)
- Madison 365
- Madison Central Library
- MMSD
- OPEN
- OutReach
- Perry Free Family Clinic
- TEMPO
- Theatre Communications Group
- UW Wisconsin School of Business
- Wisconsin Book Festival
- Wisconsin LGBT Chamber of Commerce
- World Central Kitchen

By the numbers...



Thank you for your support!

2,472
ANNUAL SUBSCRIBERS!

Clockwise Top Left: (1) Marci Henderson & Sarah Day at Game Night. (2) Sharon James, Kathie Nichols, & Steve Suleski, (3) Becky Rohwer & Rebecca Becket, (4) Amy Quan Barry, Keith Furman & Sandi Reinardy, all at the 22-23 Season Launch.





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Resident Company of
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