



**2024-2025
ANNUAL REPORT**

THANK YOU

Once more we are wrapping up a successful season, and reflecting on how grateful we are to everyone that makes what we do possible: our audiences, donors, artists, and community partners.

Your contributions are the lifeblood of our work.

COVER IMAGES (CLOCKWISE): Greg Prigel and Marcus Causey in *King James*; Heidi Armbruster and Colleen Madden in *Summer, 1976*; Jamal James and Josh Krause in *A Case for the Existence of God*; and Sarah Day in *Murder Girl*. Photos: Ross Zentner.

BELOW: Forward Theater Company Staff, Board of Directors and Advisory Company, 2024-2025.



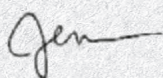
We are so proud of the stories told on our stage this past year, and the unforgettable memories they provided. We think about that beautiful mimed game of 1-on-1 at the end of **King James**. Watching the Old Fashioneds being muddled as snow fell outside the window of Marty's Supper Club in **Murder Girl**. Two brave women sharing confidences (and a joint!) on the Paul Klee-inspired set of **Summer, 1976**. The final, desperately-needed embrace concluding **A Case for the Existence of God**. Moments that only existed because talented playwrights dreamed them up for our directors, actors, and designers to interpret, and our amazing crew to execute. We celebrate the 113 artists (mostly Wisconsin residents) who made it all happen!

Over 19,000 patrons joined us at the theater this season. Every year we work to make the experience engaging and accessible. We give away hundreds of free and low-cost tickets each year. Alongside our ASL-interpreted performances for patrons who are Deaf or hard of hearing, we now offer both Audio Description and Tactile Tours for Blind and low-vision members of the community. And our free pre-show lectures and post-performance talkbacks remain essential to the Forward Theater experience.

This season was also marked by the accomplishment of a long-time goal: the creation of an endowment that will provide crucial annual operational funds to Forward Theater in perpetuity. We are endlessly grateful to Pleasant Rowland for providing an incredible \$2 million matching grant, and to the 464 individuals and foundations who so generously rose to that challenge!

With the cost of producing professional theater at all-time high levels, and with our fundraising efforts focused on that one-time endowment challenge, we were not able to fully cover this season's expenses with revenues. We knew that was likely to be the case as we built our budget, and allocated funds from our reserves to cover the difference. With subscription and single ticket sales continuing to increase, and our faith in the commitment of our broad donor base, we look forward with optimism to many more seasons of living out our mission of service to this wonderful community.

Thank you for being part of Forward Theater — as an artist, audience member, or donor. We are so very grateful.



JEN UPHOFF GRAY
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



JULIE SWENSON
MANAGING DIRECTOR

KING JAMES



WRITTEN BY

Rajiv Joseph

DIRECTED BY

Mikael Burke

SEPT 12-29, 2024

“Can you even imagine what it was like for two very bright young men to see their very first professional theater AND meet the artistic director AND have their picture taken with the cast members? Not to mention that it was one of the best plays you’ve ever produced! I think this is what it’s all about.”

—JANE COLEMAN

This Cleveland-set two-hander about basketball fans launched our 16th season with a slam dunk! Marques Causey and Greg Pragel took audiences on a journey that encompassed deeper issues of racial and economic differences, alongside the pure joy of rooting for your hometown team. Led by rising-star director Mikael Burke, and featuring the design talents of Karen Brown-Larimore, Colin Gawronski, Brian Grimm, and Mike Lawler, this production both charmed and moved audiences.

With its focus on male friendships, *King James* offered a lovely introduction to our theater for some new audiences, and we were pleased to offer blocks of complimentary tickets to ten local nonprofit organizations for use by their clients.



Greg Pragel and Marques Causey in *King James*. Photo: Ross Zentner.

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THE CAP TIMES



MURDER GIRL



WRITTEN BY
Heidi Armbruster

DIRECTED BY
Jen Uphoff Gray

NOV 7-24, 2024

“We totally enjoyed *Murder Girl*. We appreciated the purely entertainment aspect of it, and we were COMPLETELY FOOLED! Of course, the acting was wonderful; the set was FABULOUS. This play was exactly what we needed.”

—PATTY PELTIER

What a thrill it was to bring this brand-new play by a Wisconsin writer to the stage. Set in a classic supper club (with pitch-perfect production design by Steve Barnes, Joe Cerqua, Jono de Leon, and Ren LaDassor), this murder mystery was filled with twists and turns – both comedic and emotional. The rock-star ensemble of Casem AbuLughod, Cassandra Bissell, Liz Cassarino, Sarah Day, Casey Hoekstra, and Celia Klehr (with a cameo from Meg DeRoche) played to sold-out houses every night. A Wisconsin story, told by Wisconsin artists, on our Wisconsin stage. We’ll raise an Old Fashioned to that!

Murder Girl also provided an opportunity for us to partner with our friends at the Wisconsin Book Festival for a delightful free event at the Central Library featuring a conversation between playwright Heidi Armbruster and Mystery To Me bookstore owner Joanne Berg.

SPONSORED BY



NANCY CIEZKI &
DIANE KOSTECKE

SUMMER, 1976



WRITTEN BY

David Auburn

DIRECTED BY

Laura Gordon & Laura Rook

JAN 30–FEB 16, 2025

“THANK YOU for amplifying women’s voices and stories. Forward Theater is going to help me get through the next four years.”

—JILL LUNDBERG

“You always choose fabulous thought-provoking plays and the most talented actors to challenge our thinking. Thank you for your stimulating contribution to the quality of life in Dane County.”

—KRISTI WILLIAMS

This recent Broadway hit was brought to life on the Playhouse stage by a fearless team of women who pulled off a true high-wire act with our production: led by co-directors Laura Gordon and Laura Rook, actors Heidi Armbruster and Colleen Madden each brought to life both of this play’s characters in alternating performances! Scores of audience members came to see *Summer, 1976* a second time so they could experience these phenomenal actors in both roles.

This poignant and often-hilarious tale of an unlikely friendship between two mothers during the era of Second Wave feminism was deeply relatable, prompting rich talkbacks. And gorgeous production design by Joe Cerqua, Shelley Cornia, and Jason Fassl made this an especially sumptuous experience.

Colleen Madden and Heidi Armbruster in *Summer, 1976*. Photo: Ross Zentner.



SPONSORED BY



STEVE & JACQUI
SULESKI

Josh Krause and
Jamal James in
*A Case for the
Existence of God*.
Photo: Ross Zentner.



A CASE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD



WRITTEN BY
Samuel D. Hunter

DIRECTED BY
Jen Uphoff Gray

**MAR 27–APR 13,
2025**

“We go to see plays performed because sometimes magic happens, life-changing, belief-testing, soul-stretching magic. This play, as everyone at Forward made it come alive, is magic. Thank you.”

—DAVID LANGFORD

With this acclaimed play *FTC* returned to the work of Samuel D. Hunter, author of *Lewiston/Clarkston*, which we produced in 2021. For only the second time in our history, we converted the Playhouse into a theater-in-the-round, this time with the stage set on a turntable. This unusual approach gave us the perfect setting to share Jamal James and Josh Krause’s searingly intimate portrayals of two single fathers struggling to find connection in each other and faith in themselves. With each new scene the audience was able to see the story play out from a new perspective, underscoring how hard it can be to truly understand another human being.

With designs by Joe Cerqua, Jason Orlenko, and Noele Stollmack (and a turntable built by Wisconsin’s own Spotlight Construction and operated by our stellar assistant stage manager Abbi Hess), *A Case for the Existence of God* perfectly wrapped up our season focused on the essential role friendships play in our lives.

SPONSORED BY



**SYBIL & MAURICE
BETTER**



Forward's biennial festival of original monologues took place at Overture Center in May: twelve playwrights, twelve directors, and twelve actors brought to life this year's theme, Guilty Pleasures.

Car Seat Celebrity

by Rachel Zake | Pepper Pike, Ohio
Directed by Jill Anna Ponasik, Performed
by Karen Estrada

Confessions of a Sneaker Head

by Opal Ellyse Tomashevskia
Verona, Wisconsin
Directed by Sheri Williams Pannell,
Performed by Opal Ellyse Tomashevskia

Daydream Damsel

by Jamie Custer | Chicago, Illinois
Directed by Shannon Heibler, Performed
by Jessica Jane Witham

F Words

by J.M. Louis | Oregon, Wisconsin
Directed by Emily Glick, Performed by
Kelsey Anne Johnson

Filet O Fish

by Lucy Wang | Los Angeles, California
Directed by Sean Langenecker, Performed
by Nick Kaprelian

Grandma the Goblin Queen

by Marcia Jablonski | Mineral Point,
Wisconsin
Directed by Meghan Randolph, Performed
by Quanda Johnson

Her Guiding Light

by Karen Saari | Madison, Wisconsin
Directed by Maureen Janson, Performed
by Tamara Brognano

If There's One Thing In My Life That's Missing

by Karl Curtis | Verona, Wisconsin
Directed by Ali Mansouri, Performed by
Ken Miller

Lost

by Sophie Bohr | New York, New York
Directed by Roseann Sheridan, Performed
by Caroline Hansen

Off the Back

by Jonathan West | New York, New York
Directed by Orion Risk, Performed by
William Bolz

Safety Guaranteed

by Matthew Fay | Brooklyn, New York
Directed by Jess Schuknecht, Performed
by Anthony Leonard

Thou Shalt Not

by Judith Strang-Waldau
E. Greenwich, Rhode Island
Directed by Jake Penner, Performed by
Carrie Sweet

BY THE NUMBERS

2,758

SEASON SUBSCRIBERS

438

NEW SUBSCRIBERS

1,268

STUDENT & EDUCATOR TICKETS

113

PAID CONTRACTS

64

TALKBACKS

14

CREW MEMBERS

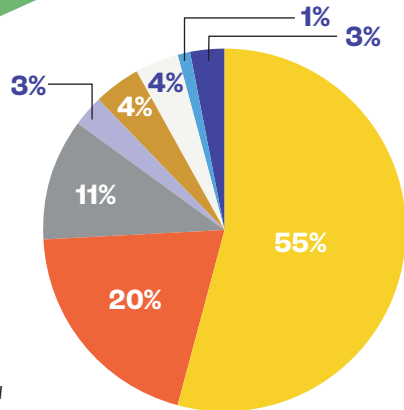
YOU SUPPORTED US!

INCOME: \$1,539,122

- **TICKET SALES**
- **INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS***
- **INVESTMENTS**
- **CORPORATE SUPPORT**
- **FOUNDATION SUPPORT**
- **EVENTS**
- **GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**
- **OTHER REVENUE**

**Individual Contributions for 2024-2025 are lower than in past seasons due to significant funds raised for the Future Forward Endowment Campaign.*

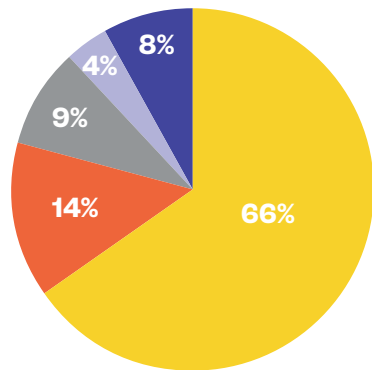
Thanks to a generous match by the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation, and 464 individual donors, Forward Theater completed a successful endowment campaign in 2024-2025. We now have \$4 million endowment.



ARTISTS GOT PAID!

EXPENSES: \$1,673,590

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



16 DIRECTORS	25 ACTORS	16 PLAYWRIGHTS	21 DESIGNERS	7 STAFF
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9 STAGE MANAGERS	3 BROKEN ROCKS GLASSES DUE TO OVER-RIGOROUS MUDDLING	9 UNDERSTUDIES
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ENGAGEMENT

Who we support is as important as who supports us!



Never Read in Your First Draft

Heidi Armbruster and Joanne Berg of Mystery to Me discuss the murder mystery genre at the Wisconsin Book Festival.



Next Act Artistic Director Cody Estle, flanked by Brenda DeVita, Sheri Williams Pannell, and Brent Hazelton, discusses building relationships with artistic directors at the inaugural Wisconsin Directors Lab.

Forward artist Kayla Salter Giltner hosts a master class in dramaturgy for La Follette High School theater students.

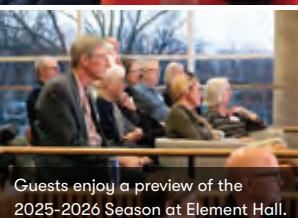


PATRON EVENTS

Director's Circle Dinner with Jonathan and Susan Lipp, David Hall, Jen Uphoff Gray, Kathie Nichols and Terry and Jean Prahl.



Colleen Madden preforms *Lady Disdain* for a Forward Leader private event at Maiahaus. Photo: Sharon Vanorny.



Guests enjoy a preview of the 2025-2026 Season at Element Hall.



Hans and Susan Pigorsch, Vreni and Chris Enos, Buck Rhyme, and Anne Rodgers Rhyme attend Feast Forward. Photo: Sharon Vanorny.



Sarah Milestone and Adam Erdmann attend the Forward Leaders New Play Development Reading. Photo: Sharon Vanorny.

FEAST FORWARD

On June 12th, over 150 guests gathered for our annual fundraising dinner at the Elks Lodge to celebrate our "Sweet Sixteen Prom."

RIGHT: Feast Forward Honorees Scott Thornton, Susan Sweeney, and Betty & Corkey Custer. Photo: Sharon Vanorny.



GAME NIGHT

Nearly 200 guests joined us March 2nd at the Monona Terrace for a fun night of games, raffle prizes, a cake walk, trivia, and other merriment.

RIGHT: Scott Lewis, Cassie Carney, Laura McMillan and Julie Swenson.



FORWARD THEATER Co. ANNUAL REPORT

Creating a home base for
Wisconsin theater professionals
and audiences that expands the
cultural and economic life of the
greater Madison area.



FORWARD THEATER CO.

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ALL PLAYS PERFORMED IN:

**OVERTURE
CENTER for
the ARTS**

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