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Building Our Presence

The West Virginia Public Theatre, in partnership with the College of Creative Arts of West Virginia University, enhances the cultural environment of the state and region by providing quality professional programming and educational outreach experiences for all citizens.

West Virginia Public Theatre does not stand alone. Its growth, its successes, and its ability to meet its mission are tied to our community, our neighbors, and our supporters. The more WVPT can do to build partnerships and serve its communities, the more we will succeed at that mission.

Saying that and stepping up to make partnerships happen are two different things. In the past year, the theater's board and staff have paid a great deal of attention to making things happen in our communities and in our organization.

Like many arts organizations, we faced challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic that left us with smaller audiences and less funding. Our efforts to offer theater on-air with West Virginia Public Broadcasting and to take careful steps to get back to live performances are paying off. In 2023, we saw a positive move toward larger audiences. Our annual holiday performance, which last year was *Narnia: The Musical*, drew enough interest from school groups and the public to allow us to add additional show dates. Other performances saw better attendance as well.

We reached out to our Morgantown community with two family-friendly comedy night fundraisers. Designed to build more awareness of WVPT, the comedy nights allowed us to branch out in a different theatrical arena and feature regional comedians who are receiving national attention.

Our board is changing, too. This year, as we replace members whose terms expired, we sought new faces who bring regional and national perspectives to our organization. You'll see changes in our marketing and communications efforts. We revamped our website and hope you'll find it easier to visit and reserve tickets for our shows.

We will continue to grow our education programming and hope to add more schools to our matinee performances. We will continue our partnership with West Virginia University's School of Theatre and Dance, offering students and educators opportunities to work with our theater staff and with professional theater crews from around the country.

Most importantly, we are dedicated to emphasizing, acknowledging and celebrating the wonderful talent of West Virginia's authors, actors, and theater professionals as often as we can. We also appreciate and are thankful for the support of our patrons, our donors, and our sponsors. Your contributions are invaluable.



Paul Kreider, DMA
Board President
West Virginia Public Theatre



Bringing the Show to the State Robyne Parrish directs *Clue: The Musical*

Robyne Parrish says directing a play is “just gravy”. As long, of course, as you have a great cast in place, strong design and production teams, and know that letting the team’s expertise and experiences inform the back stories of the play.

“I’ve learned when you allow the people with whom you are working to vest themselves in the show, you will have a collaborative effort and a better show,” said Parrish, who is directing *Clue: On Stage* for West Virginia Public Theatre.

This is the first time Parrish is directing a WVPT show but not her first experience with the theatre group. She was Elizabeth in *Young Frankenstein* in 2017. Since then, she and Jerry McGonigle, WVPT artistic director, have been looking for a project that fits Parrish’s busy travel schedule.

A resident of New York City, Parrish directs plays throughout the East Coast. “I love traveling, seeing new places and meeting new people,” she said. “I am excited that we are able to do this because I enjoy visiting Morgantown and working with the WVPT team, which does really great work. And I think this play is the stage designer’s dream with different sets and scenes.”

Parrish said WVPT offers a unique experience for the entire crew of its shows.

“Being a guest director allows me to bring a different perspective to the show as does the theatre’s process of using local and national talent for cast, staging and production,” she said. “This all adds up to a great experience for everyone in the show and everyone who attends the show.”

Parrish has a BFA degree from North Carolina University School of Arts and is an MFA candidate at Point Park University in Theatre and Pedagogy. She is starring as Hecate and PIB in the Off Broadway show *Sleep No More* and has acted in and directed several shows for Front Porch Theatre in Pittsburgh. Among her professional credits are founding artistic director for Sonnet Repertory Theatre in New York City and former artistic director for Gilbert Theatre in Fayetteville, NC. Her acting credits include performances on *Law & Order*, HBO’s *Gossip Girls* and *A Man Called Otto* with Tom Hanks.

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AUG. 23 **DIAMOND RIO**
WITH ZONA HESTER

AUG. 30 **PLAIN WHITE T'S**
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***Kill the Bird* wins 2023 Broadway Licensing Scholarship**

Erica Kuhn had the idea for *Kill the Bird* for a while before she wrote it. A graduate student pursuing her MFA with the WVU School of Theatre and Dance's Studio Acting Program, the Iowa native put pen to paper after helping develop and direct 2022 scholarship winner Justin Borak's play *A Writer's Room*. "I was eager to go up for the competition and broaden my focus in new work development," said Kuhn.

Kill the Bird was born out of an experience in her childhood. "My mother was really ill in a hospital, and our talking bird wouldn't stop calling out for my dad in her voice," she said. "It was torture for him, and when she was able to recover, he looked at little me and said, essentially, 'It's a good thing she pulled through, because I thought I was going to have to kill that bird.'"

While her father's comment was an exaggeration, the experience stayed with Kuhn, who wrote the play based on her experiences and her understanding of life.

"I hope the biggest [audience] takeaway is hope," she said. "I hope that, if they cry, they

also laugh, and if they feel bummed out, they also feel inspired."

Writing the play was only one part of the Broadway Licensing scholarship experience. Kuhn submitted an excerpt of the play and, following its acceptance, a full draft. Next she had to present a pitch for her work.

"It was pretty intense for me because, while I have decades of acting experience and growing comfort around directing, I had probably only let five people read my writing," she said. "At the end of the day, my great joy in life is theater and talking about it, so when I came to the realization that the process at its core is still just that, it became more manageable! When I found out my play had been chosen, I was thrilled."

The biggest production challenge was directing in the play when some of her options fell through. "I'm not a fan of doing this, especially in new work development, because I think you can lose some objectivity," she said. "I worked to create an environment where collaboration means everyone's ideas hold the same weight, where we can be frank with each other and also have a good time. It was an awesome learning experience as both a writer and director, because I found myself learning from my cast and team every day."

Cody Taylor as
*Aslan in Narnia:
The Musical.*



The Actor Behind the Puppet

Cody Taylor has been acting since he was 4 years old. In all that time, no one had asked him if he could sound like James Earl Jones until WVPT Artistic Director Jerry McGonigle was considering the young actor to play Aslan in West Virginia Public Theatre's holiday production of *Narnia: The Musical*.

"I was looking for a show to do around the holidays and saw the casting call for the play in Morgantown," said Taylor. "Jerry contacted me and said he was looking at me for the role of Aslan and I thought, no way I've got the stature for this. But when Jerry told me I would be the voice behind a puppet, I was ready to do it."

Aslan, also known as The Great Lion, is the creator and one true king of the world in Narnia. He is a representation of all that is good. Performing with a puppet was not new to Taylor. His BFA is in physical theater from Coastal Carolina University, where he studied circus art, Commedia dell'Arte, and dance theater. His education included studying for a year abroad at the Academia dell'Arte in Arezzo, Italy.



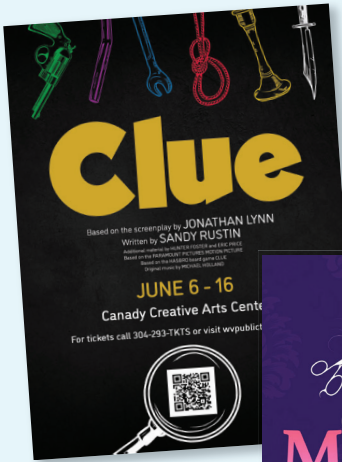
Taylor is an actor, musician and clown from Lexington, Kentucky. Along with his twin brother, Cameron, he entered the world of theater in his hometown when his mother realized neither boy was much interested in sports. "We participated in children's theater and, when I was in middle school, it occurred to me that I could get paid for this."

Taylor was familiar with WVPT and West Virginia University before he answered this casting call. Following his graduation from Coastal Carolina, he considered attending graduate school and was specifically interested in attending a university connected to a professional theater.

"Performing as Aslan was incredible—and incredibly challenging," he said. "I had to sing operatic songs while working the lion puppet. Finding a position that allowed me to manipulate the puppet and bring the most resonance to my voice was physically demanding."

Taylor also played the roles of Professor Digory Kirke and Father Christmas in the musical.

"Performing with the West Virginia Public Theatre was gratifying," he said. "This was my first lead role, and I felt appreciated and valued for my work. Having the support of the cast and crew was invaluable."



Mark Your Calendars! **Here's the 2024 Performance Schedule.**

JUNE 6-16

Clue: On Stage

JUNE 27-30

Steel Magnolias

DECEMBER 7-11

A Christmas Carol

In partnership with WVU School of Theatre and Dance

COMING SOON

Developmental Reading

The King of Mars

(Broadway Licensing Scholarship Winner Show)

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and order tickets for the show by visiting wvpublictheatre.org
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Theater as a Teachable Moment

There's nothing like live theater to give young students an appreciation for a world many of them see all too infrequently, if at all.

"Attending a live theater performance is an absolute must for students," said Paige Muendel, Suncrest Middle School seventh-grade English teacher. "Watching a play is unlike anything many of our students have seen. It is a unique experience for them to watch a story come to life."

Seventh graders at the Morgantown middle school have been regulars at West Virginia Public Theatre's school matinees for several years, she said. "Sometimes we'll have students who aren't too excited about this field trip before they go," she said. "When we get back to school, all the comments are positive."

Muendel and the other two seventh-grade English teachers teach the students about more than just the play or musical they are about to see using educational materials provided by WVPT and their own class plans. "We take advantage of this opportunity to talk to the students about what a theater is like and the proper etiquette of attending a show," she said.

"It is important to prep the students for the shows," she said. "Sometimes we do some pre-show reading of the story, or we might offer lessons on the time period, the demographics, or the people they will see on the stage." It helps them understand what they are going to see and gives them something to look for as they watch the show.

"Depending on the performance, we might read a portion of the story before the show and then again when we return to the classroom so the students can compare and contrast what they read and what they saw," she said. "We talk about what they remember and what they think about the show so they have the chance to share. We also talk with them about the broader picture of theater and how, besides the actors, there are set and costume designers, technical teams, and directors who are all just as important to the show as the people on the stage." In some cases, once students who love to draw see a show, they begin to see how working in theater might be something they could do.

"Since part of our curriculum is to expose students to career opportunities, the performances give us something to talk about in our discovery programs," she said.



The Shows Go On

If West Virginia Public Theatre had a report card, its board and staff would be happy with all Es. A perfect grade would mean the theater is reaching its most important goals:

- Entertain, inspire, and educate audiences with quality professional theater;
- Employ honorable and responsible business practices with our community;
- Educate the youth of the state and region to the wonders of the theater;
- Enhance the economic and cultural environment of our region; and
- Enrich our region by practicing and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion.

WVPT presented its first play under inauspicious circumstances in 1986. The performance took place in a tent on the parking lot of the Sheraton Lakeview Resort. Carol Lawrence showed up for the performance with a broken leg. Dean Jones prayed for the rain to stop.

The theater troupe weathered that first show and, since then, has met many challenges

on its way to becoming West Virginia's premier public theater.

WVPT has presented performances for more than 1 million patrons, including more than 150,000 school students who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to see live theater. WVPT has presented more than 190 Broadway-quality productions featuring talent from West Virginia and across North America, including acclaimed Broadway, television, and film actors.

In 2016, WVPT reorganized and entered into a partnership with the West Virginia University College of Creative Arts. At the same time, the theater extended the range of its theatrical performances.

"We strive to deliver quality theatrical productions that entertain and provide contemporary messages about cultural and political issues," said Paul Kreider, WVPT board president. "We provide productions for children, many of whom are seeing a live performance for the first time. We provide experiences and educational opportunities for WVU students."

Geoffrey D. Williams as MLK and Willa Bost as Camae in *The Mountaintop*.

Two of those programs are staged readings done in partnership with Broadway Licensing. WVPT hosts the readings and provides opportunities for production of the new student plays. In 2023, WVU graduate student Erica Kuhn's *Kill the Bird* was selected for the new student play.

WVPT's board and staff recognize that value-added opportunities highlighting state authors and actors are as important as staging popular Broadway plays. In 2020, WVPT presented a new musical based on West Virginia author Denise Giardina's powerful book, *Storming Heaven*, highlighting the plight of miners. In 2023, the theater presented *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall. This stunning drama is a fictional retelling of the last night of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s life. Both plays left audiences moved, inspired, and in awe of the power of the human spirit.

"Our partnership with the Canady Creative Arts Center gives us access to different stage options that allow our artistic team to be creative with the productions they choose to present," said Kreider. "Innovative performance sets and presentations let us further enhance the theater experience for our audiences, our actors, and our production crews."

WVPT works to make the theater-going experience suitable and comfortable for all, he noted. The Canady Creative Arts Center is designed with ADA accessibility in mind, so WVPT can provide safe accommodations for its audiences. WVPT provides people who are purchasing tickets the opportunity to let theater staff know in advance of any disabilities or accessibility issues they might have. Knowing this, the theater team can be prepared to assist its patrons and let the production crew and cast know of any issues that may arise.

Funding for WVPT programming and staff comes from ticket sales, grants, and donor support. The actors and production staff hired for each production are paid equitable wages for their work.




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There's always risk, but you cannot advance and make discoveries without risk. We need to push forward and take the risk because people with addiction and Alzheimer's are not going away. It's here, so why wait 10, 20 years? *Do it now.*"

Ali Rezai, MD • Executive Chair, Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute

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▲
Dr. Rezai's innovative approach to treating addiction and Alzheimer's was recently featured on CBS' 60 Minutes. To watch the segment, visit WVUMedicine.org/RNI.



Making Her Way in Theatre

Behind the scenes at West Virginia Public Theatre, there is plenty to do. Rachel Rock, a senior undergraduate in WVU's School of Theatre and Dance, is enjoying the opportunity to learn it all.

"My focus is stage management, and I am taking advantage of every opportunity I can get to be involved in it here in Morgantown and in other venues," said Rock, a Grafton, West Virginia, native who is working as WVPT assistant production manager. This summer, she will be the stage manager for *Clue: On Stage* and assistant stage manager for *Steel Magnolias*. In the fall, Rock plans to expand her network in Las Vegas or Chicago.

Earlier this year, she participated in a stage management mentorship program at the United States Institute for Theatre Technology in Seattle, Washington. "This program gave me the opportunity to expand my network with other mentees and stage management mentors from around the

world," she said. "And I was selected to stage manage one of the conference events, *Celebration of Life* with John Gruber, Chicago Flyhouse, Inc., automation project manager."

At the same conference, Rock led a session about how digital stage management prompt books can allow for more accessibility and inclusion regarding cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities. "The research I presented earned me an honorable mention award from the West Virginia University Mentorship Grant under the supervision of my professor and mentor, Aubrey Sirtautas," she said.

Working with WVPT, Rock has honed her stage management skills by working in a variety of shows with local and national directors. Her experiences have been diverse. She worked with Yoav Kaddar, director of the WVU Dance Program, on dance performances. She has stage managed developmental workshops and productions of the Broadway Licensing shows along with her work with WVPT.

"Stage management covers such a range of responsibilities and requires me to have an understanding of much more than timing and positioning," said Rock. "I find a lot of joy in my work through evolving my practices with new techniques and styles that will work best with my team." She sees Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and accessibility practices as major opportunities in her work.

"I have also learned how to use a variety of digital programs related to theater management and acquired an understanding of stage finances, budgeting, and expense tracking," she said. "There's so much involved in this work that challenges me and keeps the work interesting and keeps me on my toes."

*Ron Siebert as Scrooge
and Andra Ward,
Jr. as the Ghost of
Christmas Past in A
Christmas Carol.*



*James Odom as
Sherlock, Kara Arena
as Irene, and James
Reilly as Moriarty in
Sherlock Holmes:
The Final Adventure.*





INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

Privately funded scholarships are crucial to providing creative arts students with the financial resources they need to attend and be successful at WVU.

Learn more about how you can open doors of opportunity for students and help WVU become the modern land-grant university of the future at wvuf.org.



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October 3 – 6, 2024

Into the Woods

music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

book by James Lapine

October 24 – 27, 2024

Celebration of Dance

October 31 – November 2, 2024

Co-production with West Virginia Public Theatre

Charles Dickens'

A Christmas Carol

adapted by Andy Lyons

December 7 – 11, 2024

Dance Now!

January 30 – February 1, 2025

The Rimers of Eldritch

by Lanford Wilson

February 27 – March 2, 2025

March 4 – 9, 2025

9 to 5

music and lyrics by Dolly Parton

book by Patricia Resnick

April 10 – 13, 2025

Showcase of Dance

May 1 – 3, 2025



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