

# SHOWBILL



## *Opening the Door for Arts*

**S**ometimes, organizations share space and services without forming alliances. When those organizations work together and engage each other in their missions and visions, the alliance taps into a transformative energy that allows them to expand their individual businesses and offer more to their constituents, clients, and communities.

Such is the case with the West Virginia Public Theatre and the WVU School of Theatre and Dance. As leaders of these arts organizations, we are proud of the work we are doing for our communities, our students, and our audiences. We are engaging more people in education and professional theater.

As the premier professional theater in northern West Virginia, WVPT offers the public opportunities to reflect on historical events—real or fictionalized—through an artistic and emotionally provoking medium. Our hope is that, while informing the human condition, we can entertain our audiences as well.

As an acclaimed educational institution, the School of Theatre and Dance strives to give its students as many opportunities as possible to develop their talents, hone their skills, and work with nationally active professionals.

We have some exceptional ways of merging both missions.

WVPT appreciates the support it receives from WVU, as it provides us with cost-effective venues that allow us to meet our budget and produce quality theater. We are then able to offer talented students work alongside seasoned professionals as actors and production staff, which helps students learn from the experienced. Our partnership helps the School of Theatre and Dance maintain membership in the University Resident Theatre Association.

The School of Theatre and Dance, in turn, is able to offer undergraduate and graduate students opportunities to be involved in a wide range of theater offerings, from traditional musicals to contemporary productions. Our partnership gives students who are interested in writing plays opportunities to participate in a workshop process in which they develop new works.

Sharing space, sharing staff, and sharing visions is working in Morgantown and benefitting so many people who are dedicated to sharing their love of and enjoyment in the arts with our neighbors, our communities, and our children.



**Keith Jackson, DMA**

*Philip J. Faini/Falbo Family Dean  
College of Creative Arts,  
West Virginia University*



**Paul Kreider, DMA**

*Board President  
West Virginia Public Theatre*

# More Than Telling a Story

West Virginia Public Theatre is committed to presenting live productions with special attention to the nature of being a human in the world today. This means offering contemporary and classic shows in innovative ways. It also means offering plays that reflect and explore issues that affect people in West Virginia and surrounding communities.

One of the creative ways WVPT achieves this vision is by partnering with writers, organizations, and institutions to bring discussion and education together with performances.

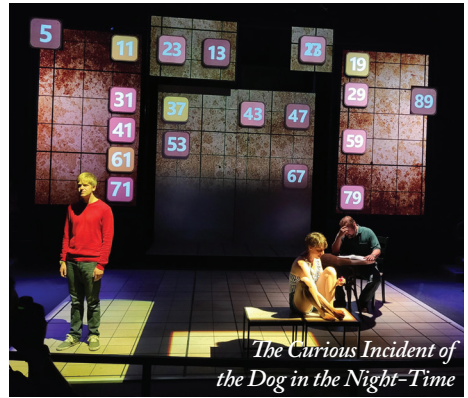
In the summer of 2022, WVPT accomplished this with its production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. This award-winning 2003 mystery novel by British writer Mark Haddon was adapted for the stage by Simon Stephens and premiered in August 2012.

The story takes place in Swindon, England, where 15-year-old Christopher John Francis Boone discovers that his neighbor's dog, Wellington, has been fatally speared with a garden fork. Christopher is described as a mathematical genius with sensory and social challenges that affect his interaction with the world. Although the author never says that Christopher is autistic, his behavior mirrors that of someone on the autism spectrum.

WVPT partnered with the WVU Medicine Children's Neurodevelopmental Center in the development of Christopher's character. After the opening performance, Krestin Radonovich, Ph.D. and director of child neuropsychology, met with the audience to talk about the challenges of autism and to answer questions.

Jerry McGonigle, artistic director, enlisted Radonovich's help to ensure that the crew and cast maintained mindful attention to Christopher's portrayal and did not go overboard with mannerisms and interaction styles.

"The WVPT team was challenged to tell the story in a way that did not label Christopher as autistic. We did not want the audience to be caught up in what a person with autism should look like or what they would do," said Radonovich. "We focused on how Christopher



and those who interacted with him might be feeling and let that drive what the behaviors would look like."

For Noah Silverman, the actor who portrayed Christopher, the experience was especially gratifying. He had played the role once before.

"The first time I did this show, I was terrified because it is a difficult show and a difficult role," said Silverman. "When I auditioned with Jerry McGonigle, I told him I wanted to do it completely differently. I paid attention to every note the team gave me, and I did some research of my own as well."

Silverman, who was on stage for the entire show, found the WVPT production to be exceptional. "The ensemble truly worked together to help the audience try to understand someone else," he said. "One of the blessings of the show is that it truly brings you inside of someone else's mind and encourages you to think in a completely different way."

Radonovich said she hoped audiences came away with more understanding of the challenges people with autism face and a better perspective on what the person experiences. If the audience has future interaction with people who have autism, they will have a better idea of how to respond to make the interaction better.

"When I was first asked to help, I wondered how much I could help them," she said. "The production crew and cast were excited about the information that I brought to the story. This was a different way to use my knowledge and experience in new and exciting ways."



## Nothing Better than Giving Arts a Chance

Sean Cercone describes himself as a matchmaker. From his offices in New York City, the WVU School of Theatre and Dance alum looks for creative ways to engage authors and creative writers and to connect them with regional theaters that are interested in hosting new works.

He first learned about the WVU theater and dance program after completing an undergraduate degree at Frostburg State University's Department of Theatre and Dance. Searching for a graduate program through the University Resident Theatre Association (URTA), he had zero offers. A friend told him that WVU was having local auditions for its MFA program and loaned Cercone his 1988 Jeep Cherokee to get to the audition.

"My audition went fine," said Cercone. "But the committee asked if I had anything else to show them." Cercone told the committee he was doing student-directed productions on Saturdays. He would get his Frostburg classmates together and cook breakfast for everyone. They would read a new play every week.

"I showed them a book that included articles about me and the things we were doing," he recalled. "The committee said, 'You know what? This is so much better than your audition.'"

He received his only graduate school acceptance from WVU.

"I learned so much there," he said. Cercone credits the team at the WVU School of Theatre and Dance with giving him an opportunity that no one else offered. As a result, he partners with the School of Theatre and Dance and West Virginia Public Theatre to provide an annual \$5,000 grant for a student at the school to produce an original work. The grant award was introduced in 2020.

Once selected by a review committee, the student receives the money and works with WVPT to produce a reading of the play.

"Nothing surprises me about the scholarship submissions because the range, scope, and depth of unique, vibrant, and creative ideas are phenomenal," he said. "My hope is to give these students the same experience I hoped for when I was starting out."

He remembers when he got money to work on projects like the West Virginia Shakespeare Festival. "It blew my mind," he said. "I think I got ten or twelve thousand dollars. It felt like a billion dollars at that time. That's what I'm trying to recreate for students in the same position I was in. At the end of the day, it's actually not about the thing they make—it's more about the process. It's about creating."

In 2017, Cercone founded Broadway Licensing and its family of companies, including Dramatists Play Service, Playscripts, Stageworks Production, and Broadway on Demand. As CEO, he heads an organization that offers the world's first 360-degree theatrical development opportunity, including production, publishing, and digital and traditional distribution systems. Broadway on Demand, launched in 2020, was nominated for an Emmy in 2021.

Cercone has an overreaching vision with creative plans for helping to bring theater and performances digitally to as many people as possible. "My whole goal in my career, in my life, is to leave this art form better than the generation that came before me. That's what we do as artists, right?"

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A Cleveland, Ohio, native who grew up in upper New York State, Borak performed with a touring children's theater and entered the comedy scene when he moved to Chicago after earning a bachelor's degree in communication and theatre from Charleston Southern University. When the COVID-19 pandemic slowed his work down, he decided to enter graduate school and give more attention to acting.

Once he arrived at WVU, Borak found McGonigle true to his word when it came to identifying opportunities for him. He played Mr. Fezziwig in West Virginia Public Theatre's *Christmas Carol* production and has had other minor roles with the theater. He intends to continue trying out for shows as long as he is in Morgantown.

In 2022, Borak entered the Broadway Licensing grant-writing competition open to WVU students in partnership with West Virginia Public Theatre. Each year, Broadway Licensing provides \$5,000 for the production of an original work. Borak was working on an idea for a play titled *A Writer's Room*.

He submitted his entry along with the first 10 pages of his play to the awards committee, which includes professionals from Broadway Licensing, WVU School of Theatre and Dance, and West Virginia Public Theatre.

"I was selected as a finalist and had to submit another 20 pages of the play, along with making a presentation to the committee," he said. "Once I received the award, I was responsible for producing the play for a staged presentation with West Virginia Public Theatre."

*A Writer's Room* is based on Borak's comedy writing experiences. In his play, five comedy writers with diverse political and life experiences are locked in a room and charged with developing a comedy monologue for a late-night show. Borak describes his characters as the most volatile people at your family's Thanksgiving dinner.

The play premiered with the staged

## Class + Theater = Great Experience

The advantage of attending a university where the master's program is affiliated with a professional theater was not lost on Justin Borak when he began his search for a school where he could study for his advanced degree.

"It was important to me to be able to continue my work in comedy and playwriting at the same time that I worked on my degree in theater," said Borak. When he met with Jerry McGonigle, who teaches acting and directing at the WVU School of Theatre and Dance, he knew Morgantown was the place for him.

"Jerry said, as long as students keep up with their acting classes and school assignments, the School of Theatre and Dance encourages students to pursue their other creative interests," he said. "He told me about the school's partnership with West Virginia Public Theatre and about opportunities I could find through the theater."

The choice has rewarded Borak with some unique opportunities and exciting professional development.



*Justin Borak*

reading in April 2022 at WVU’s Antoinette Falbo Theatre. Broadway Licensing was so pleased with Borak’s work that it invited him to begin writing for the organization’s Playscripts group. The group produces plays for high school audiences.

Again, Borak received support for the work from West Virginia Public Theatre. His first play, *Community Garden*, had its premiere reading in October 2022. With financial support from WVPT, Borak was able to hire and pay four undergraduate student actors for this production. “Aubrey Sirtautas, WVPT’s production manager, was great to help me with this aspect of the production and taught me a lot,” he said.

“*Community Garden* is available through Playscripts, and I am working on some other ideas for them as well,” said Borak. “This opportunity demonstrates the value of a university–theater partnership in the best way.”

Borak said having a published play and a continuing relationship with a major New York City licensing company benefits him and others. The undergraduate students who performed are listed in the script along with WVPT and WVU.

“Not only will I have professional credits to show for my work, but the other students will as well,” he said. “No matter what big city I move to, I will have a stronger resume because WVU and WVPT were willing to create the space where I am able to experiment and experience as many aspects of theater as I am willing to go after.”

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# SUPPORT MESSAGES

“ I am a writer and actor and have been working with WVPT in the development of a show I have written, *Storming Heaven: The Musical*, based on the novel written by the “West Virginia treasure” Denise Giardina. It was an incredible experience to work on this with a group of artists who understood not only excellent theater, but also the uniquely West Virginian voice that we were trying to capture. Because of our WVPT production, we have been in talks with several larger regional theaters and with Broadway producers. It would thrill us to no end to have West Virginia Public Theatre in every Playbill for our show, listed as the place where the ‘first live production’ was done.”

— KATY BLAKE

“ I am a former teacher and current member of the Monongalia County Board of Education. Our students have been provided the opportunity to experience quality theater performances throughout the years. This is so important to the growth and development of the whole child. Our community thrives on a diverse and quality arts culture. WVPT has been at the root of this opportunity.”

— JENNIFER HAGERTY, *Monongalia County Board of Education*

“ Being both on and behind stage for last year’s production of *School House Rock Live!* made me fundamentally aware of the impact this company has on the greater West Virginia cultural landscape. It is always a joyous part of any work not only to see who in the audience is experiencing their first live theatrical piece, but to know that their first experience is a tightly produced, thoughtfully directed, intently crafted musical that neither talked down to them nor took them for granted.”

— RYAN McCURDY, *actor, Virginia Beach*



*A Christmas Carol*

“ Creating opportunities for partnerships like the one we have experienced with WVPT helps strengthen the arts community across West Virginia. It is imperative that these opportunities manifest themselves in the future, not only to bolster the outreach and mission of their organization, but also to help advance arts and education statewide.” — LARRY DOWLING, *West Virginia Public Broadcasting*

“ The support of new musicals, indeed new theater in general, is a complicated process. It involves multiple levels of collaboration between artists and administrators. And it demands that an arts institution have a high level of support from its community of audience members. Most of all, there must be conversation between all the stakeholders of the development and production of this particularly fragile point in the process of a new work of art. It is to West Virginia Public Theatre’s credit that it checked all these boxes. It is tremendously rare to find a place where artists can work on a piece without the pressure to succeed, where they can try things and fail, and where audiences will support those risks and provide honest feedback. West Virginia Public Theatre has built a level of trust, with both its artists and its audiences, that ensures that the conversation can be robust and successful.” — KENT NICHOLSON, *Associate Producer of Musical Theatre, Playwrights Horizons*



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## **Dance Now!**

artistic director Yoav Kaddar  
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## **The Book of Will**

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March 1 – 3 & 5 – 8, 2024

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“ Thank you, West Virginia Public Theatre, for the wonderful production that was provided to Oglebay Resort during this past year’s annual Festival of Lights. The production of *Jingle This*—created, produced, and directed by the theater’s team—was perfect for our needs. West Virginia Public Theatre took my concept of a high-spirited and fast-paced, yet traditional holiday show and absolutely brought it to life! The professional manner in which the process was managed and the production that resulted allowed Oglebay Resort to create new, as well as raving, fans.”  
 — HERB FAULKENBERRY, Vice President of Sales & Marketing, Oglebay Resort

“ My family and I discovered the West Virginia Public Theatre three years ago at Christmas. I was looking for different opportunities to incorporate into our holiday traditions when I came across the West Virginia Public Theatre performing *It’s A Wonderful Life*. The West Virginia Public Theatre has become a part of our family’s Christmas traditions, and I am so very thankful that it is. Living in a rural area, my family and I do not get to be a part of the arts on a regular basis. We look forward to the performances each year. I love the fact that this group continues on in our great state to not only be a part of our traditions, but to also allow others to have access to this form of art.” — CHARITY WOODS

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## Let Them See Shows!

Charlotte Haas, WVPT manager of operations, hopes to see the day when fewer West Virginia children raise their hands when asked, “Who here is seeing a live performance for the first time?”

“So many times, more than half of the children raise their hands,” said Haas. “It always makes me think we need to change that. We need to get them to shows that engage them and get them excited to go home and tell their parents they want to go again.”

This is a priority for WVPT. It is one of its mission statements to educate youth of the state and the region to the wonders of the theater.

For more than 25 years, WVPT has provided a holiday show that offers live theater at a discounted rate to children in Greater Morgantown and surrounding areas. The theater provides free educational material for pre- and post-attendance classroom use to accompany the production.

In 2019, more than 3,500 students and teachers attended the holiday student matinees—and almost 3,000 attended public performances that year as well. In 2020, COVID-19 prevented WVPT from producing a live show. The theater partnered with West Virginia Public Broadcasting to offer a live broadcast performance and made the recorded show available to teachers. In 2021, live shows were presented again to smaller audiences. Almost 1,400 students and teachers attended the matinees for *A Christmas Carol*, and about the same number of students attended public performances.

In addition to students from Monongalia County, these holiday performances draw students from Marion, Harrison, and Taylor



*School House Rock Live!*

counties. Each year, student groups from Garrett and Allegany counties in Maryland come to see the show, as do students from West Virginia’s Upshur, Wetzel, and Ritchie counties.

“Some schools come every year, and there are usually new schools each year as well,” said Haas. “We do not provide financial assistance for the student matinees—we sell the tickets for \$8, or about half of our lowest ticket price, and we provide complimentary tickets for teachers and administrators.” Transportation to Morgantown is usually handled through school field trip budgets.

The educational guides are distributed a month before the opening matinee performances so instructors can integrate the guides into their lesson plans. Each guide includes a play synopsis, a list of characters, biographical information on the playwright, and a guide to theater etiquette. Guides also include vocabulary lists, pre- and post-show questions for the students to consider, and fun activities for students of all ages.

“We work with each group to ensure that any special needs are met,” said Haas. “When special needs are identified, we make certain that the theater’s ushers and staff are aware of these. We also let the play’s director know so that he can share the information with the actors and production crew. The more we can do to ensure the comfort of our young audiences, the better their experiences are.”

In 2022, WVPT staged student performances of *School House Rock Live!* Haas said it was wonderful to see. “Students were singing along with the actors and even dancing in the rows,” she said. “That’s just the kind of theater experiences we want to provide, and we hope those experiences will keep them coming back.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC THEATRE BY JOSH WILLIAMSON



*A Christmas Carol*



## 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.
- 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 previously have had the opportunity to see live theater. The 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. It extended the range of its theatrical performances as well. "We strive to deliver quality theatrical productions that entertain and provide pertinent messages about cultural and political issues of today," said Paul Kreider, WVPT board president. "We provide productions for children, many of whom are seeing a live performance for the first time. We have several successful programs that provide experiences and educational opportunities for WVU college students."

One of those programs is staged readings done in partnership with Broadway Licensing. WVPT hosts the readings and provides opportunities for production of the new plays.

*Miners face tragedy in Storming Heaven: The Musical as tensions mount in West Virginia's small mining communities.*

WVPT's board and staff keep an eye on trends and changing theater landscapes. They recognize that value-added opportunities to present works 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*. Giardina appeared after the final performance and spoke with the audience about her artistic process and her commitment to telling the story of West Virginia's mining history.

WVPT's current schedule includes a winter holiday show, an April scholarship workshop, a June season, and an August staged reading.

"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 strives to make the theatergoing experience suitable and comfortable for all, he added. The Canady Creative Art Center is designed with ADA accessibility in mind, so WVPT can provide safe accommodations for its audiences. WVPT works to ensure this by providing those purchasing tickets the opportunity to let theater staff know in advance about any disabilities or accessibility issues they might have. Knowing this, the theater team can be prepared to assist its patrons and can 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.



The Arts Council of Greater Morgantown (ACGM) is a proud supporter of the West Virginia Public Theatre.

The West Virginia Public Theater is made possible through the **Organizational Arts Grant**, a program funded by the City of Morgantown, Monongalia County Commission, and the Douglas H. Tanner Memorial Fund.

*The Organizational Arts Grant is facilitated by ACGM and Your Community Foundation (YCF) of North Central WV.*



**WEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC THEATRE**

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*For their continuing support and encouragement, WVPT thanks these generous donors.*

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