

PROLOGUE

OCTOBER 2021

LIGHTS UP ON YOUR PLAYHOUSE!

Return to the stage to
experience theatrical joy.

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HOUSE



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PROLOGUE is the pre-show publication of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. It is published as a service to Playhouse season subscribers, donors and others.

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LIGHTS UP ON YOUR PLAYHOUSE!

By Blake Robison



Photo of Blake Robison by
Claudia Hershner.

With overwhelming enthusiasm and gratitude, we're returning to the Marx and Rosenthal Shelterhouse stages for the 2021-22 season. Our spaces are humming once again with artistic energy as we create unforgettable experiences — the kind that only live theatre can create.

We've been working to bring your Playhouse into a new era, from the construction of a new theatre complex to the development of new plays and the transformation of our educational outreach and artistic engagement. We've always dedicated ourselves to bringing to life amazing stories that meet the moment with curiosity and artistry. Now, we celebrate the joy of theatre like never before.

In this issue, read about two world premiere Cincinnati stories that'll welcome you back to the theatre. *The West End*, by Cincinnati-born playwright Keith Josef Adkins, tells an emotionally compelling story about a transformative chapter in our city's rich history. And *Need Your Love* — a continuation of KJ Sanchez's *Cincinnati King* — features an intimate musical portrait of King Records legend, Little Willie John.

The upcoming season also highlights a once-in-a-generation transition. With construction of our all-new mainstage theatre complex underway, you'll watch the exciting progress we make on the Rouse Theatre and say goodbye to the Marx Theatre. Help us celebrate the Marx's historic, artistic legacy and prepare to welcome a new era of accessibility, patron comfort and state-of-the-art stage magic in the Rouse Theatre.

We've missed you all since 2020, and we can't wait to bring your Playhouse into an exciting time of theatrical joy, communal engagement and unrivaled moments of artistic connection. See you at the theatre!

COVID-19 HEALTH AND SAFETY

As we prepare to welcome you back, the safety and well-being of our patrons, artists and staff is our top priority. **Beginning Oct. 1, all audience members will be required to wear masks and to provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination or negative COVID-19 PCR test certification to attend our productions.** These measures will help ensure everyone's comfort gathering for our indoor, live performances that are being sold at full capacity. For more details on the requirements and other COVID-19 safety protocols, visit cincyplay.com/safety.

According to surveys conducted with our patrons in June and again in August, 95 percent of you report already being fully vaccinated! Thank you for doing your part to help ensure everyone has a safe and enjoyable theatre experience.

REIMAGINING HAPPILY EVER AFTER, VIRTUALLY

By Sam Kerns

Discover “once upon a time” like never before as the Playhouse’s Off the Hill touring series begins its season of fairy tales and fables with Greg Banks’ adaptation of *Snow White*. In this fun-filled and fantastic retelling, Snow White and her most trusted companion, Dwarf #4, discover the true meaning of happily ever after: friendship, family and a whole lot of laughter. The tour will be streamed virtually from Oct. 22 to Nov. 14.

Banks’ plays are familiar to Playhouse audiences. His contemporary versions of classics like *Robin Hood* and *The Jungle Book* delighted students and families in previous seasons, and *Snow White* is sure to do the same.

“Greg Banks is a playwright that I love to program,” says Daunielle Rasmussen, Playhouse Director of Artistic Engagement and the director of the show. “His adaptations of classic tales are vibrant, funny and give female characters agency over their participation in the story.”

While princes and magic wands are left to “save the day” in some stories, Snow White and Dwarf #4 discover what it means to share one’s truth in full in this new tale. Together, the two characters retell the story we all know — in which Snow White finds refuge with seven dwarfs after the evil queen tries to have her killed — but relay it from their own perspective. Two actors put their performance skills to the test by embodying all the characters

themselves. With twists and tweaks from the original, Banks’ script reimagines the classic fairy tale as Snow White takes ownership of the story named after her and becomes a brave and adventurous heroine.

“I connect to her resiliency, and I love how Snow White creates an entire world for herself that reflects the love she gives to those around her,” says Rasmussen. “It is that love, and her found family, that save her — versus a prince coming to the rescue.”

Snow White fits neatly into this season’s Off the Hill theme of fairy tales and fables. Along with *Hare and Tortoise* and *The Little Mermaid*, students, families and young audiences explore multiple interpretations and visions of classic tales. This coincides with the dramatic interpretation that’s foundational to the Playhouse’s educational programming. *Snow White* will be available virtually in the fall, *Hare and Tortoise* will be available both virtually and in person this winter, and *The Little Mermaid* will be performed in person during the spring.

Says Rasmussen, “Every script I read of these stories is so different, and it is so fun to live inside the creative interpretation that each playwright brings.”

Wrapped within Banks’ fast-paced *Snow White* script are themes of friendship, family,



Photo by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.

kindness, community and perseverance. Just like Snow White, audiences have agency in what they take away from the story. For Rasmussen, this is a story about “finding your community and creating family out of friendships that you develop.” What will *Snow White* mean to you?

Visit cincyplay.com for more information about tickets, virtual tour dates and streaming availability. *Snow White* is recommended for ages 6 and up.

Off the Hill is made possible with support from **THE ROBERT AND ADELE SCHIFF FAMILY FOUNDATION, THE CHARLES H. DATER FOUNDATION** and **THE P&G FUND OF THE GREATER CINCINNATI FOUNDATION.**



The 2019 cast of *A Christmas Carol* by Mikki Schaffner.

GIVE YOUR SPIRITS A LIFT!

A Christmas Carol, presented by First Financial Bank, makes its joyous return to the Playhouse this holiday season! With faithful storytelling and an exuberant ensemble led by Bruce Cromer as Ebenezer Scrooge, the spellbinding production you’ve made an annual tradition will illuminate the stage again. Scrooge’s time-traveling journey with the spirits reminds us of the power of redemption and restores our faith in our fellow man.

In building the Rouse Theatre, we’ll elevate our technical abilities for coming seasons, and we’ll be bringing to life a new version of Charles Dickens’ timeless tale redesigned for our new stage. Come see the production you love for its last season in the Marx Theatre before we set the stage for a mesmerizing new experience for you and your family. *A Christmas Carol* runs Nov. 24 to Dec. 30.

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RUNNING TIME The show runs approximately 2 hours and 5 minutes, including one intermission.

CONTENT ADVISORY Recommended for all general audiences, including children ages 5 and older. Due to the full-length nature of the show, children younger than 5 cannot be admitted. Please contact the Box Office if you have questions or require additional information.

MARX THEATRE

WITH SUPPORT FROM
THE ROSENTHAL FAMILY FOUNDATION

THE WEST END

By KEITH JOSEF ADKINS

OCT. 9 – NOV. 7, 2021

Photo by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.



A RIVETING CINCINNATI TALE

By Russell Florence Jr.

The Great Migration was a seminal moment for generations of Black people moving from the South to the North in the early 20th century. Playwright Keith Josef Adkins, a Cincinnati native, has brought this critical period of American history to the compelling forefront of his engaging, timely drama *The West End*.

Set in a row house in 1941 in Cincinnati's historic West End, the world premiere play centers on Grace — a headstrong, hard-working, Georgia-born migrant — and the people and events that impact her life and community. She struggles with a changing landscape, particularly the reluctance many share toward anyone arriving from the South claiming to be a relative. At the same time, German residents face growing hostility as the U.S. teeters on the brink of World War II. Grace finds her world shaken by a mysterious stranger, proving that not all which is left behind can be forgotten.

"Grace was created because I wanted a Black woman to guide me through this story," says Adkins, a Princeton High School and Wright State University graduate who served as staff writer for television shows *The Good Fight* and *Girlfriends*, and story editor of *For the People*. "It's no secret that the stories of men dominate many narratives (including mine). However, I've heard incredible stories from the women in my family whose testimonies about life inspire and haunt me."

He adds, "With that said, I also wanted to create a character who (like so many during the Great Migration), fled the South for personal reasons and was haunted by those reasons (but never spoke of them). I wanted to give voice to someone who, in fact, has been paralyzed by their southern past but is doing their very best to thrive far away from their turbulent origins. In a way, Grace is like so many of us who don't know how to break

free or forgive themselves for challenging choices, who need the extra time to reconcile with the life the world has thrust upon them."

The West End is a deeply personal continuation of the playwright's interest in his ancestry. His previous drama *Safe House*, which had its world premiere at the Playhouse in 2014, was inspired by his matriarchal forebearers — a free Black family of shoemakers in Cynthiana, Kentucky, before the Civil War. This time, he set out to honor his patriarchal roots.

"My mother's family has been in the Cincinnati area since the late 1700s," Adkins says. "They were considered free people of color, and I honored them and their lives with my play *Safe House*. My father's family moved to Cincinnati's West End from Georgia during the 1920s, '30s and '40s. They were part of the Great Migration, and I wanted to honor their experience with *The West End*."

The Great Migration's influence could be felt primarily in the workforce. Due to few rights and a lack of opportunities in the South, the appeal of job openings in northern industries could not be denied, especially at the beginning of World War I as many businesses increased production to meet wartime needs. It is estimated that as many as 500,000 Black people moved from the South to the North during the 1910s and the early 1920s in particular. The Great Migration provided a population boom to major cities in Ohio such as Cleveland, Toledo and Akron.

The West End is directed by Playhouse Associate Artist Nicole A. Watson.

"Keith is a phenomenal writer and artist with deep roots in Ohio," says Watson, who directed our 2017 production of *Mr. Joy*. "I love that *The West End* is one slice of life that celebrates and honors all of those who had to find new homes during the Great Migration and looks at Cincinnati as a crossroads or meeting point between so many different people. I love that the play is an examination of found family. *The West End* is one such play that has deep roots to Black life in Cincinnati. I can't think of a better home for *The West End* than Cincinnati Playhouse."

Adkins' historical drama has been developed as a new play commission by the Playhouse. The story unfolds in the Marx Theatre beginning Saturday, Oct. 9.

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RUNNING TIME
CONTENT ADVISORY

An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Oct 8.

Recommended for ages 13 and up. This historical drama finds characters wrestling with mature topics like racism, war, xenophobia and adult relationships. They discuss these with in-depth wisdom and stoicism, though not without occasional adult language and a few acts of violence.

CLOSE TO HOME

By Russell Florence Jr.



Photo of Keith Josef Adkins by Jessica Fallon Gordon Photography

Playwright Keith Josef Adkins provides insights into the relevance and personal connections to his new drama *The West End* — a world premiere and Playhouse commission.

Which plays or playwrights have influenced you the most throughout your career and particularly within the context of *The West End*?

As an early-career playwright, I was mostly influenced by the works of Lorraine Hansberry, Henrik Ibsen, August Wilson, the canon of novels by Toni Morrison, as well as the works of several of the classic Black playwrights such as Phillip Hayes Dean and Adrienne Kennedy. However, during the development of *The West*

End I've specifically thought of the canon of August Wilson and his desire to put a spotlight on his Pittsburgh hometown.

Why do you feel the Great Migration is such an imperative historical moment?

It's no secret that many African Americans navigated unapologetic and systemic racism in those southern states. From Jim Crow to the Klan, every day could begin or end with danger or exploitation. The Great Migration provided many (including my family) an opportunity to expand their economic goals. It also provided a respite after 150 years of institutional southern racism. Was the North free of social and economic obstacles? Absolutely not. But for many, it was better than the South. In the case of my family, Cincinnati's West End was the destination and the place they could pour into their children and grandchildren all the hopes they couldn't achieve in Georgia.

***The West End* contains relevant themes to current struggles in the Black community. What do you feel your play has to say about America today?**

Truth is, I didn't have to do much digging to find the political or social relevancy of my play. All I had to do is drop myself in 1941 Cincinnati and the relevancy found me. There was systemic racism, unwarranted xenophobia, gender politics, class politics and all of that spinning around the beginning of a world war. It was clear to me that not much has changed. We're dealing with many of the same issues now.

As a Cincinnati native, what do you want local theatregoers to know about their city and its history?

I definitely hope the play brings to life what some of Cincinnati and the West End were like during that time. From the power and struggle within the Black community to the fear of Germans at the start of World War II, a lot was at play for our hometown. But I want to be clear: *The West End* is a fictionalized story about a real place seen through the lens of a fictionalized character. It isn't meant to speak for the full West End experience, and I'm certainly not the spokesperson for that incredible community. There was so much happening in the West End during 1941 and many different experiences, points of view and highlights exist. This play is just one story.

“All I had to do is drop myself in 1941 Cincinnati and the relevancy found me.”

— KEITH JOSEF ADKINS



Deonna Bouye and Shane Taylor in 2014's *Safe House* by Keith Josef Adkins. Photo by Sandy Underwood.

MEET THE CAST OF *THE WEST END*



Amara James Aja
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Grace



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Peek



Kevin Cristaldi
Ziegler



Shanelle Leonard
Chloe

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NEED YOUR LOVE

By KJ SANCHEZ

OCT. 30 – DEC. 12, 2021

Photo right and on the cover by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.



LITTLE WILLIE JOHN RETURNS

By Natalie Clare

In 2018, the Playhouse presented an authentically Cincinnati world premiere that thrilled audiences and celebrated a bit of hometown pride. KJ Sanchez’s musical docudrama *Cincinnati King* brought to life a groundbreaking chapter of our history through its tale about Syd Nathan’s King Records Studio. Throughout the 1940s and ‘50s, King Records contributed some of music’s most enduring songs from “Fever” to “The Twist” to “Blues Stay Away from Me.”

Cincinnati King enjoyed praise from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *CityBeat* alike, citing Sanchez’s devotion to local history and the power of the show’s musical numbers. “Lucky us to have it here,” wrote *CityBeat*, while the *Enquirer* called it “an intriguing journey filled with the stories and the personalities that powered the studio’s unlikely success.”

The musical drama traced Nathan’s complicated relationship with singer Little Willie John — a dynamite performer and one of the unsung heroes of rock history. Now, the character who charmed audiences returns in *Need Your Love* to share more about his life and perform live music just as dazzling as the premiere.

“From the first day of auditions for *Cincinnati King*, we could tell that Little Willie John was going to be an exciting character, and then our first preview proved how much the audience was connected with him — especially when he sang!” Sanchez says. “There was always a deep interest in Willie, and I always had a passion for spreading the word about his brilliance.”

Cincinnati King told just a few chapters of the R&B singer’s life and career, including his musical work with Nathan at King Records, his promising rise and, ultimately, his premature downfall and tragic death at the age of 30. The singer was a beloved performer who electrified crowds

with his powerful pipes and his irresistible stage presence which inspired the likes of James Brown.

“He was one of the finest singers to have ever lived. He could sing anything, and he should still be alive today,” says Sanchez.

While sheltering in place last year, Sanchez says she couldn’t get John out of her mind — especially when demonstrations around social justice swept across the media.

“I kept thinking about him as I watched news reports and read the paper about the Black Lives Matter movement,” she says. “I always have some of his songs in my playlist when I go running, and every time I listened to his voice, I felt I was listening to raw love for life, great power and a kind of skill and gift that doesn’t grace our planet very often.”

Like *Cincinnati King*, *Need Your Love* features an onstage band for John’s musical performances. Musicians Richard Livingston Huntley, Ralph Huntley and Cincinnati’s own Terrell Montgomery return for musical accompaniment. Livingston Huntley also returns as Music Director.

“The story of Little Willie John is so powerful and compelling, and his music is so engrossing and current that I’m very excited to be able to share his music and story with more people,” says Livingston Huntley, who calls the late singer “unbelievably talented.”

“This is a new production, with a new actor, set in a different time, so we will want to honor the sound and feel of the original King Records music,” says Livingston Huntley. “But this time we’re going to include a keyboard, which will give us a little more flexibility to add some additional sounds (organ, strings, etc.), which will give the music a different kind of feeling.”

In a nod to musical history, Livingston Huntley says the show features one of John’s last recordings with Capitol Records. “He does an absolutely spellbinding version of ‘You Are My Sunshine,’ which will definitely make it into the production!”

More beloved R&B songs that audiences can look forward to include “Shakin’,” “Fever,” “Leave My Kitten Alone” and, of course, “Need Your Love So Bad.” This continuation of the King Records story takes the Rosenthal Shelterhouse stage on Saturday, Oct. 30.

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ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY **THE HAROLD & MIMI STEINBERG CHARITABLE TRUST**

MEDIA SPONSOR **100.3**

RUNNING TIME An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Oct 29.

CONTENT ADVISORY Recommended for adults and teenage audiences. This musical docudrama celebrates the life of R&B talented singer, whose behind-the-scenes tales feature some mild adult language and mature themes.

THE STORY CONTINUES

By Natalie Clare



KJ Sanchez

With *Need Your Love*, KJ Sanchez returns to the King Records docudrama to present more music and more stories from Little Willie John, R&B's unsung hero.

Your show *Cincinnati King* made its world premiere at the Playhouse in 2018. What was it like bringing the story of King Records to life in the studio's hometown?

It was amazing. Each time I sat in the house with our audience, I could see someone nodding their head or gently elbowing their friend/spouse they had come with, as though recognizing parts of their own history that they cherished. There were other times in the play when I could tell that the audience was hearing a part of their shared history that they

did not know, or did not know the full story, and it made the air in the space electric. And then at the end, when we cover the end of his life, there were always quiet sobs, at the painful truth.

What elements of that show will return for *Need Your Love*, and what new elements can audiences look forward to?

They can expect the same quality music — we have the same band coming back! What is new is we hear about Little Willie John's childhood in Detroit, how he got his first record with Syd and so much more about his time and life. I had the unbelievable good fortune to interview Little Willie John's sister! I spoke with Mable John, and she told me some great stories that we will share.

What's your personal favorite song by Little Willie John? What draws you to it?

"All Around the World." His first notes just ring out like a beacon. And the lyrics are great: "If I don't love you, baby, grits ain't groceries, eggs ain't poultry and Mona Lisa was a man."

Is there anything else about the production, *Little Willie John* or the King Records story that you'd like to share?

I think the themes and messages are really relevant to our lives today. Each and every day, we should be asking, "What are we doing with our talent? What are we passionate about? How do we honor those that have fallen between the cracks? Who tells our story?"



Seth L. Johnson and Richard Livingston Huntley in *Cincinnati King*. All *Cincinnati King* photos by Mikki Schaffner.



Ralph Huntley in *Cincinnati King*.



Richard Crandle as Little Willie John in *Cincinnati King*.



Terrell Montgomery in *Cincinnati King*.



SAVE THE DATE!

Join us for a special information session — exclusively for Playhouse subscribers — to learn more about building the new mainstage theatre complex.

MONDAY, DEC. 6

5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the Playhouse

After celebrating the groundbreaking of our new Rouse Theatre this summer, construction is now underway! The new mainstage theatre complex will ensure Cincinnati's place as a leading national arts and cultural destination and provide the following key benefits for our broader community:



ECONOMIC IMPACT: Based on a study completed by the University of Cincinnati Economic Center, we project \$97.7 million in positive economic impact over 50 years, with \$2 going back into the community for every \$1 spent on the project.



COMMUNITY CONNECTION: The new building will be more inclusive and accessible, inside and out.



NATIONAL RECOGNITION: With enhanced technical abilities and modernized production spaces, the new theatre will enable national producers to try out Broadway-bound shows at the Playhouse before they move to New York City.



Lead Donors Moe and Jack Rouse break ground.



Playhouse Managing Director Emeritus Buzz Ward, Capital Campaign Co-Chairs Rob Reifsnnyder and Woody Taft, Board Trustee Jerry Shroat, Lead Donor Jack Rouse, Board President Ellen G. van der Horst and Director of Development Bethany Doverspike at the Groundbreaking Celebration.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? Hear from Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison and the project architects about the exciting features you can expect to enjoy when our new, state-of-the-art mainstage theatre complex opens. **To RSVP for the Dec. 6 event, contact events@cincyplay.com. For more information, call 513-977-2081.**