

PROLOGUE

FEBRUARY 2022

INCIDENT AT OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP

It's 1973, and the Irish-Catholic O'Shea family muddles through a series of hilarious mishaps that jeopardizes their reputation — and their souls.

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ABOUT PROLOGUE

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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MEET OUR NEW ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Joanie Schultz

As the Playhouse steps into a new era of theatre, we've welcomed nationally renowned theatre artist and arts leader Joanie Schultz as part of our artistic team. She started in her role as Associate Artistic Director in November. She'll collaborate with Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison to fulfill the theatre's mission, oversee day-to-day operations of the artistic department, lead the theatre's new play development work, help conduct season planning, direct mainstage productions and represent the theatre locally and nationally.

"It is my passion as an artist and arts leader to bring diverse people together through our differences to connect over stories that remind us of our common humanity. I am thrilled to bring that lens to Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park — a theatre I have long admired under Blake's leadership, for the diverse programming and exciting new plays that have premiered here," says Schultz.

Schultz previously served as artistic director of WaterTower Theatre in Dallas-Fort Worth, where she oversaw two years of diverse and award-winning work in 2017 and 2018. From 2014-16, she served as associate artistic producer at Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago as part of the Leadership U One-on-One Fellowship, which is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and administered by Theatre Communications Group (TCG). She has directed throughout Chicago and the nation including The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, Victory Gardens Theater, Cleveland Play House, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Studio Theatre in Washington DC.

Robison looks forward to a promising future with Schultz. "We are entering a period of tremendous growth as we emerge from the pandemic and open our new facility to the community. Joanie will help us chart a path forward that is artistically ambitious, inclusive and forward-thinking."

Says Schultz, "It is an honor to be here in this moment as we build and open our new theatre, which provides new opportunities to connect our theatre both with artists and our community here in Cincinnati, but also with the nation."

OFF TO THE RACES

By Victoria Forbes

The Playhouse is off to the races as it opens its second Off the Hill touring production of the 2021-22 season. Based on the classic Aesop fable and adapted by Brendan Murray, *Hare and Tortoise* is a touching tale of friendship and opposites. As the seasons change from sunny spring to snowy winter, beloved characters prepare for the ultimate competition: a nail-biting race between the swift and energetic Hare and the slow and steady Tortoise. This charming story, directed by Playhouse Education Director Ariana Moses, lights up screens and stages from Jan. 22 to Feb. 27 with a hybrid tour that will offer the production both virtually and in person.

Believed to have been an enslaved person in Greece, Aesop was a fabulist who lived from 620 to 564 BCE and is accredited with writing over 600 fables. His pieces often carry themes of morality, motivation and growth. *The Hare and The Tortoise* is one of his most acclaimed works which famously teaches that “the race is not always to the swift.”

The Hare and The Tortoise has been translated into numerous languages and adapted for literature, music, film and stage since its original publication. In Murray’s 2011 adaptation, Hare and Tortoise are two unlikely friends navigating the changes that arise from growing up and learning to let go. Hare is a rambunctious thrill-seeker who challenges the tranquil Tortoise to a race. Upon each challenge, Tortoise tells Hare to wait until next season to race, which prompts the impatient Hare to respond, “I can’t wait for now to be over.” When the two finally race, Hare is confident he is sure to win, but when

he falls asleep waiting for the pokey Tortoise to catch up to him, Tortoise surpasses Hare and wins the race after all.

The Playhouse’s production is performed by two members of the Bruce E. Coyle Acting and Education Intern Company, and it bursts with energy from beginning to end. From rapidly changing seasons, dynamic characters and a riveting race, the play lends itself to tremendous movement and music.

Moses says the play has moments that both children and adults can enjoy. “I hope that each age group can find commonalities in the opposite characters as well. Adults and children have so many of the same wants and desires — to be seen, cared for and loved. They’re not so different!” She adds, “And this is the power of theatre and particularly of Theatre for Young Audiences — children relate to and empathize with so many different types of characters, and through this, they learn more about themselves and the world.”

Moses also emphasizes, “While the fable itself holds the moral, ‘slow and steady wins the race,’ the play does not. Instead, at the end of the race, when Hare is puzzled at how Tortoise won, they are reminded that we live in ‘a world where anything can happen.’ It’s a thought that is scary at first and then becomes exciting. Anything can happen!”

“This story is about the journey of discovery, learning through experience and the patience that comes with age,” says Playhouse Director



Photo by
Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith
& Associates.

of Artistic Engagement Daunielle Rasmussen. “The lesson is learning to take the time to stop and appreciate the process rather than having a narrow focus on the outcome.”

This inspirational story is recommended for children in pre-kindergarten and up, and it is accessible for everyone with virtual and live performance options available. In-person touring performances begin Jan. 22 and run through Feb. 20 at community centers around Greater Cincinnati. Pre-recorded, virtual performances will be available to stream for free from Feb. 18 to 27 and can be accessed for a weekend during the run dates.

For more information about the production and performance options, visit cincyplay.com.

Off the Hill is made possible with support from **THE ROBERT AND ADELE SCHIFF FAMILY FOUNDATION**, **L&L NIPPERT CHARITABLE FOUNDATION** and **THE CHARLES H. DATER FOUNDATION**. Virtual performances supported by **MACY’S**.

OFF THE GRID RETURNS

The Playhouse’s Off the Grid series returns in person for the 2021-22 season in February. These interactive theatrical events take place throughout the community, and audiences are invited to immerse themselves in the world of live stories and performances.

TOP MOM AND POP by Julie Locker

Feb. 25 and 26 | Garage On York in Newport, Kentucky | Cost: \$30

Chefs from three family-owned restaurants compete on the fictional, reality competition show *Top Mom and Pop*. But on the day of filming the season finale, nothing is going right. The host is missing, kitchen sabotage is wreaking havoc on set, and the producers are floundering. Is *Top Mom and Pop* doomed to become a one-hit wonder? Join the show as a live studio audience member for front-row access to behind-the-scenes capers!

INTERSTELLAR EXPEDITION by Margot H.G. Manburg

March 24 and 25 | Cincinnati Museum Center | Cost: \$30

For the first time in 200 years, humankind has a second planet to call home in the far reaches of space. But disaster strikes, threatening the lives of crewmembers. Captain Promise Jones, charged with the safety of everyone onboard, summons the brightest astronauts from neighboring ships to redirect their course. Can they work together to survive the expedition? Step aboard the starship in this thrilling, interactive adventure as audience and crew members alike engage in star charting, training modules, simulations and more!

To learn more about Off the Grid and reserve your tickets for these and other upcoming events, visit cincyplay.com.

INCIDENT AT OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP

By KATIE FORGETTE

JAN. 29 – FEB. 27, 2022

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



WE'RE GONNA NEED A FEW HAIL MARYS

By Russell Florence Jr.

Katie Forgette's charmingly nostalgic comedy *Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help* conjures a simpler time built around the strong, loving foundation of a family just trying to make it through 1973.

Centered on the cash-strapped, Irish-Catholic O'Sheas of Seattle, the five-person play is told through the memory of 20-year-old Linda, who narrates the joys and woes of her household as she describes "the most turbulent day of her life." When Linda's mother asks her to tell her younger sister Becky about "the birds and bees," the bawdy conversation is ultimately overheard by the parish priest. Unamused, Father Lovett sets out to confront the family about "the corruption of their eldest daughter's soul." What follows is a fast-paced chain of events that's both unexpected and hilarious.

"I was raised Catholic and attended parochial school for 12 years, so there are definitely similarities," says Forgette. Though the play's main story is fictional, it has echoes of her own upbringing. "My father was a cab driver who worked seven days a week. My mother had many jobs over the years. She sold Avon, real estate and worked for the phone company. She operated a small daycare business out of our home in addition to looking after my grandmother who lived with us for many years after suffering a stroke. My mother did all of this after giving birth to 10 children."

Forgette, who has spent most of her life as a professional actress in Seattle, particularly with Seattle Repertory Theatre, says she wasn't overly worried about having Linda's startlingly blunt assessment of the birds and the bees serve as the play's catalyst. After all, the time period gives considerable weight to the scene just as much as the frank dialogue.

"I was concerned to a certain extent, but the conversation that Linda has with Becky has to be inappropriate enough to induce apoplexy in Father Lovett," Forgette explains. "I think one of the reasons the conversation is so shocking is because it is between two young females, and in the 1970s (and some might even say today), there were still hard and fast rules about ladylike behavior. There were things you didn't talk about because those things were unseemly or shrouded in mystery with a high 'ick' factor (such as female puberty). That said, this isn't David Mamet territory by a long shot. Linda simply uses some colorful imagery to tell her sister about the birds and the bees. It's the truth — but the truth that is fueled by the bitterness of a broken heart."

In many respects, the women at the center of the play are survivors, particularly hard-working matriarch Jo and her sister, Terri, whom Jo says is going through "a rough patch." While crafting her play, Forgette enjoyed looking back at the examples of strong women in her life that helped fashion the engaging sensibilities of the characters.

"I grew up in a Catholic family, and one thing that I witnessed that has always stayed with me is the dedication, hard work and unflinching volunteerism of the mothers and fathers of the parish, particularly the mothers," she says. "In my day, the moms did the heavy lifting: tutoring, bake sales, Catholic Childhood Association, festivals, bazaars, fundraisers, caring for the sick, emergency daycare. The organization, set-up and clean-up for every celebration under the sun from baptism to death was handled by the ladies of the parish. And if a surprise pregnancy or scandal popped up, they handled that, too. Sometimes while balancing a baby on one hip and a bag of groceries on the other."

Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help had its world premiere in July 2019 at New York's Chenango River Theatre. "There have been a few tweaks here and there," she says. "And, of course, the script went through a number of rinse cycles before the premiere. I'm crossing my fingers that Cincinnati audiences will like the play."

"The Playhouse has had great success with 'Catholic comedies' in the past," adds Blake Robison, Playhouse Producing Artistic Director who helms the regional premiere. "The O'Sheas are sort of Every Family in America. They may be Catholic and they may be Irish, but they're just like your family too!"

Meet the O'Shea family when *Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help* takes the Marx Theatre stage.

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RUNNING TIME
CONTENT ADVISORY

An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Jan. 28. Recommended for ages 13 and up. Characters discuss taboo Catholic topics like contraception, sex and sexuality, and pregnancy. They also use adult language and the Lord's name in vain quite a few times.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

By Russell Florence Jr.



Playhouse Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison directs the regional premiere of Katie Forgette's comedy, *Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help*. Here, he reflects on the play and his vision for the production.

Incident takes place in the 1970s. Why do you feel plays rooted in nostalgia have an immediate power to connect?

I think the distance gives us permission to laugh at ourselves. It allows us to relate to the characters and their behavior without the pressures of current times. Plus, the '70s are a fun decade. So many of us look back at what we did, what we wore, how we acted back then and it makes us cringe and smile.

What are some of your favorite plays centered around families? Does *Incident* feel reminiscent of one of those plays or another play?

Theatrically, *Incident* harkens to great American comedies like *You Can't Take It With You*, featuring a lovable oddball family in which everyone has heart. It also feels like the

great television shows of the '70s. Not the hokey ones with a laugh track but the ones where we grew to care about the characters. Classics like *MASH*, *The Bob Newhart Show* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. We used to tune in every week to see what would happen next to these people we knew so well.

What struck you the most about Forgette as a playwright upon your initial reading of her script?

Comedy is a tricky thing because everyone has a different sense of humor. It's the rare stage comedy that works for all audiences. When I read this script for the first time, at home in my reading chair by myself, I laughed out loud. A lot. That's always a good sign.

Which themes in the play resonated for you and will prove vital for you in your direction?

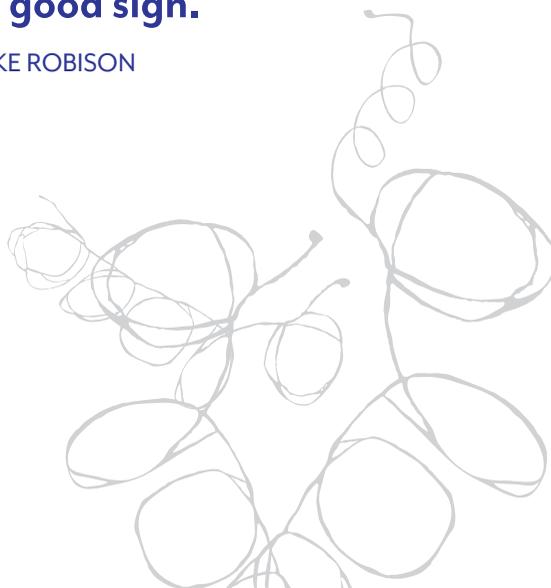
Ultimately, *Incident* is about family — the ways in which we love our families even as they drive us crazy. That's what makes it work for the audience, too. We're all experts on the topic of family.

Incident was originally planned pre-pandemic. Did the shutdown change your artistic vision in any way or cause you to think about the play differently?

If anything, the shutdown deepened my desire to have this play in our season. I loved re-opening the Playhouse with two Cincinnati stories (*The West End* and *Need Your Love*), but those are both dramas. People need to laugh — now more than ever. And you can only laugh in the theatre with a large group of people. From what I've seen, our audiences are ready to come together, poke a little fun at themselves and share some hijinks.

“When I read this script for the first time, at home in my reading chair by myself, I laughed out loud. A lot. That's always a good sign.”

—BLAKE ROBISON



MEET THE CAST



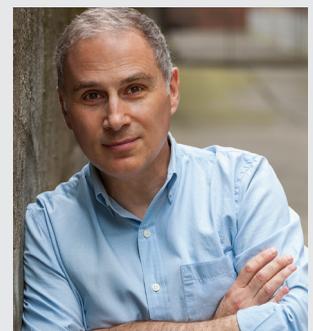
Barbara Chisholm
Theresa “Terri” Carmichael



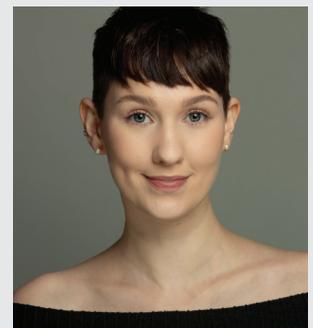
Erin Noel Grennan
Josephine “Jo” O’Shea



Elli Maddock
Becky O’Shea



John Plumpis
Mike O’Shea/Father Lovett/Betty Heckenbach



Elise Rucker
Linda O’Shea

WITH SUPPORT FROM
THE ROSENTHAL FAMILY FOUNDATION

ROOTED

By DEBORAH ZOE LAUFER

FEB. 12 – MARCH 20, 2022

Visual by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.



A NEW-AGE COMEDY

By Natalie Clare

Emery Harris, the heroine of Deborah Zoe Laufer’s *Rooted*, has lived alone in a treehouse for over a decade. She performs research on plants and plant consciousness as an amateur botanist and publishes her experiments on her YouTube channel. Except for her sister Hazel, the social platform is her only connection to the outside world. But unbeknownst to Emery, she’s garnered quite a cult following. Literally.

This warm-hearted, quick-witted comedy takes off when Emery and Hazel make a startling discovery one day: a crowd of strangers (Emery’s YouTube followers) gathering beneath the treehouse, chanting and singing praises. They have elected Emery as their new-age messiah.

Rooted marks the third world premiere of the Playhouse’s 2021-22 season, and it’s one of the theatre’s recent new play commissions. It’s also the third of Laufer’s plays to debut in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre, following *Leveling Up* in 2013 and *Be Here Now* in 2018. Both these shows feature Laufer’s signature balance of comedic dialogue and lovable characters who face wildly unexpected life changes. *Rooted* promises the same treatment with poignant nods to modern life.

“I was tremendously tickled, inspired and deeply moved when Deborah Zoe Laufer shared her play *Rooted* with me,” says director Noah Himmelstein, who calls it an ambitious dark comedy with characters that are rich and surprising. “Deb is a master at mining the laughter

that comes when people are pushed to their limits, and we delight with recognition.”

Audiences can expect to be enveloped in Emery’s world of plants and botanical experiments through an ambitious and elaborate set designed by Se Hyun Oh. The treehouse is full of plant life and greenery. It’s built around a giant oak tree that stretches so high characters can only enter if they climb a ladder and enter through a hatch.

“As Emery dives into her experiments proving that plants, like people and animals, are structured in consciousness, we also experience it through a heightened theatricality. It’s a beautiful and unique place to visit,” says Himmelstein.

Thematically, Laufer says, the story embodies feelings around isolation that are particularly resonant today. “Emery has literally put herself up a tree to escape other humans. She’s surrounded herself with plants to feel safe.” She adds, “The play is very alive with the longing for connection, the fear of connection and what it takes to truly make that connection.”

Audiences will also recognize the character Luanne Cooper from Laufer’s *Be Here Now*. Devoted to the pursuit of happiness and yearning for a sense of belonging, Luanne’s story evolves into an exploration of healing and existential meaning in *Rooted*. She enters Emery’s world as one of the YouTube followers who finds hope within her work.

“Her story was just beginning at the end of *Be Here Now*,” says Laufer. “And the actress who played her in Cincinnati, Emily Kratter, brought so much love and light and joy and sweetness to Luanne that I had to see her play the role again. And, I’ll confess — a ‘Luanne’ in

some form appears in many of my plays. That character, with a purity of intent and openness of spirit, really moves me.”

Rooted makes its world premiere debut in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre on Feb. 12.

“The play is very alive with the longing for connection, the fear of connection and what it takes to truly make that connection.”

— DEBORAH ZOE LAUFER

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RUNNING TIME An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Feb. 11.

CONTENT ADVISORY *Rooted* introduces you to memorable human characters named Emery, Hazel and Luanne — and memorable plants named Mabel, Cynthia and Gerald, among others. While the plants don’t use strong adult language and explore mature themes like mental health, the humans do, so we recommend that human audience members be at least 14 years or older to attend.

LIFT ME UP!

By Natalie Clare



Playwright Deborah Zoe Laufer describes the roots of her warm-hearted comedy, which was commissioned by the Playhouse through the Jerome Fey Endowment as a world premiere.

Rooted follows a reclusive amateur botanist named Emery and her unlikely rise to social media star and literal cult figure. What inspired you to create a character who finds herself in this position?

The germ of this idea started with a television show I was developing with HBO. We worked for over a year on it, and then it was impossible to sell because there were

suddenly around 20 other shows about cults. And I think it's no coincidence that cults are in the zeitgeist now. We've all experienced what can happen when a charismatic, divisive figure takes hold. We've all seen what an angry mob can do.

I remember the first time I saw the film *To Kill A Mockingbird* as a kid. The angry mob comes to get Tom Robinson. It's a terrifying moment — it seems there's no way to diffuse their rage and malevolence. And then Scout (she and Atticus are on the porch) recognizes one of the men and speaks to him as a person. And it diffuses the whole situation. I remember asking my mother what was happening, and her explanation was that a "groupthink" takes over in a mob and dehumanizes people. But when you remind them of their humanity, they become individuals again. It's one of those ideas that I come back to again and again.

Another inspiration was my obsession with a scientist I discovered online, Monica Gagliano. (Look her up — you won't regret it!) Her experiments with plants have revealed that plants can learn and remember and communicate. It's really thrilling work. And, as with all my obsessions, I tell everyone I meet about it until people walk the other way when they see me coming. Once that happens, I have to put it in a play so that my friends can bear to be around me again.

Tell us about the themes in Rooted. What ideas are you exploring, and how does each of the characters relate to them?

My playwright friends and I often joke that we think we're writing radically new plays each time, but really we revisit the same themes again and again our whole

lives. A recurring theme in my plays, which is central to *Be Here Now*, is that people aren't disposable. That if we take the time and attention to know anyone, their seemingly small stories contain all our stories and are all stage-worthy.

I've also revisited the idea (central to my play, *End Days*) that if Jesus walked into the room, would you know him? If there is a savior, is the savior actually who you think she is?

And, I'm acutely aware how women over 40 become invisible in our culture. At the top of the play, Hazel feels that she's disappearing. That her life has had no meaning. She's desperate for change and feels that it's her last chance. And then, through admittedly bizarre circumstances, she has the opportunity to completely remake herself and her life. There can be a good deal of moral ambiguity (another favorite of mine) about whether her cause is a just cause, but I love watching her rise to power in the public and personal sense.

And, of course, mixed in with all the apocalyptic tropes is the growing reality of global warming. I know my little play can't do much, but it seems like every opportunity to build awareness shouldn't be squandered. And so much of my research about plants returned again and again to their role in lowering carbon levels and the danger of losing our forests.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with the audience?

This will be my third premiere with Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. That's no small thing. A play gets one premiere to launch it. After years of research and writing and angst and writing and uncertainty and rewriting, so much rides on the strength of that first production. It's a leap of faith for both the theatre and the playwright. Both *Leveling Up* and *Be Here Now* got such loving treatment in Cincinnati, and they've both gone on to have robust lives, continuing to be produced every year. As I write this, I'm still working on *Rooted*. I'm still rewriting. But I won't truly find the play till I'm in the room with my cast, my extraordinary director and all the people I've grown to trust and love at the Playhouse. It really takes the efforts of a community to birth a new play. I'm so excited to get back in the theatre and start the work!



Emily Kratter as Luanne and Eva Kaminsky as Bari in *Be Here Now*. Photo by Mikki Schaffner.





PLAYHOUSE BOARD MEMBERS, LEADING LADIES HONORED AS WOMEN OF THE YEAR

By Bethany Doverspike

The Playhouse is proud to recognize Board Members Nirvani Head and Linda Holthaus, who were named as 2021 *Cincinnati Enquirer* Women of the Year. Over the past 50 years, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and Cincinnati.com have honored and recognized more than 500 outstanding women who have changed our community for the better.

Nirvani has been an essential part of the Playhouse leadership for many years, and we are truly grateful for all the ways she makes our work possible. She is currently in her fourth term as a Playhouse trustee, having first joined the Board in 2010, and her contributions over the years have been extensive. She has both served on and chaired the committee for Abracadabra, the Playhouse's former annual gala. She has also served on many Playhouse Development committees and was a founding member of the Playhouse Leading Ladies program in 2012.

In addition to her extensive list of charitable organizations throughout the community, Linda has been an essential part of the Playhouse's Leading Ladies program leadership for several years. She's been a loyal subscriber, supporter, advocate and patron to the Playhouse for many more. Linda's dedication, attention to every detail, positive attitude, compassionate nature and commitment to excellence helped us through one of the most difficult times in Playhouse history,

and we are incredibly grateful.

The Playhouse's Leading Ladies program provides an insiders' look for theatre-loving women in our community by offering exclusive, behind-the-scenes access to world-class theatre. Both Nirvani and Linda stepped up as program Co-Chairs in 2020 during a time when we needed their calm and steadfast leadership the most: During the global pandemic we were forced to "build the plane as we flew," pivoting quickly to four exclusive virtual events (a first for the Playhouse). Yet the year was incredibly successful as we — together with our more than 125 members — embraced the virtual space to connect and continue the unique insights into creating art at the Playhouse. This was critical to our survival, as it provided almost \$84,000 to our annual fund and helped keep our momentum going into our ninth Leading Ladies season.

When women come together, great things happen — especially when you have the stalwart support and generous hearts of Nirvani and Linda at the helm. Thank you, Nirvani and Linda, and congratulations on this well-deserved recognition!



Nirvani
Head



Linda
Holthaus