

# PROLOGUE

AUGUST 2023

**WELCOME  
TO THE  
NEW  
SEASON!**



## **RING OF FIRE: THE MUSIC OF JOHNNY CASH**

Created by **RICHARD MALTBY, JR.**

Conceived by **WILLIAM MEADE**

Celebrate the music of Johnny Cash in this toe-tapping, soul-stirring musical biography.



## **SANCTUARY CITY**

By **MARTYNA MAJOK**

This unconventional love story about two children of U.S. immigrants fighting to find their place in the world is as timely as it is unforgettable.

**ALSO INSIDE: THE VELVETEEN RABBIT GOES OFF THE HILL**

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## ABOUT PROLOGUE

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Editor: Kathy Neus

Graphic Designer: Sean Martin

Contributing Writers: Tessa D'Errico, Tatiana Godfrey, Blake Robison, Lynn Smith

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Please send all inquiries, submissions and suggestions to:

PROLOGUE • Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park  
962 Mt. Adams Circle • Cincinnati, OH 45202  
Telephone: 513-345-2242 | Fax: 513-345-2254  
Email: [administration@cincyplay.com](mailto:administration@cincyplay.com)

Website: [www.cincyplay.com](http://www.cincyplay.com)

Box Office: 513-421-3888

Toll Free OH/KY/IN: 800-582-3208

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# WELCOME TO THE NEW SEASON

By Blake Robison, Osborn Family Producing Artistic Director



This past spring was a whirlwind of events and excitement at your Playhouse. We brought our once-in-a-generation project to a close, opened our all-new facility and produced five diverse productions between March and June. Now, we're looking forward to the first full season in our new home with a lineup of shows that exemplifies the best of American theatre and takes advantage of all the enhanced theatre technology our state-of-the-art facility provides.

Our 2023-24 season promises to inspire, entertain, celebrate our differences and lift up our shared humanity. It features stories that feel familiar, that stand the test of time, and that are fresh and contemporary.

Take a look at what's in store:

- The return of the toe-tapping, soul-stirring musical biography *Ring of Fire: The Music of Johnny Cash*. Directed by Playhouse favorite Marcia Milgrom Dodge. You can read more about the production, including a Q&A with Marcia, in this issue.
- Unmissable modern stories from three powerhouse playwrights who have each earned Pulitzer Prize acclaim, including Lynn Nottage's *Clyde's*, Zora Howard's *Stew*, and Martyna Majok's *Sanctuary City*. In this issue, we have an interview with *Sanctuary City* director Kareem Fahmy, who is making his Playhouse debut.
- A world premiere adaptation of the vampiric classic *Dracula*, brought back to life with humor and thrills by playwright/performer Vanessa Severo (*Frida...A Self Portrait*) and Playhouse Associate Artistic Director Joanie Schultz.
- Chaim Potok's timeless story about the human ability to reach out across differences through an exploration of Jewish culture in *The Chosen*.
- Stories that will capture your heart and make you laugh like the love story in *Vietgone* and the interactive Catholic comedy of *Late Nite Catechism*.
- Our brand-new adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, specially designed to make the most of our enhanced theatrical capabilities in the Rouse Theatre, makes its debut for the holidays.

Thank you for going with us on this journey. This is your Playhouse. We can't wait to see you here throughout the season!

**STAY CONNECTED!**



**CINCYPLAY.COM**

## OFF THE HILL TOURING PLAYS

# REIMAGINING A CHILDHOOD CLASSIC

By Tessa D'Errico

A world premiere adaptation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* will be the first Off the Hill Touring Play of the 2023-24 season, showing across the Cincinnati region this fall.

The original children's book, written by Margery Williams and published over 100 years ago, tells the story of a toy rabbit owned by a young boy who contracts scarlet fever and is told from the perspective of the toy rabbit. However, in this new adaptation written by Trey Tatum, the story shifts to highlight the young child, allowing him to be both the narrator and protagonist of his own story.

In this production, the young boy, Little, discovers his favorite toy rabbit to be a source of strength and love during the everyday ups and downs of playing with his sister, Big. Recentering the dramatic tension away from the child's illness, yet keeping it involved in the narrative, was important to Tatum. He says, "When my little brother was a baby, he was very sick...So much of his early childhood was him having the story of his illness told to him and so much of [my brother's] memory of being young and sick is really the memory of him hearing about it. In a way, he doesn't get to own this part of his story."

In Tatum's script, Little finds strength in his favorite toy rabbit and uses that strength to tell his own story, whereas in the original book, the young boy is a supporting character as the rabbit comes to life.

Tatum explains that the play is "about how we tell stories, who we allow to tell stories, and what happens when we're allowed to set our own narrative" and thinks "there are kids who will see this show who feel like their voice doesn't matter at home, or isn't as valued as their siblings. I also think there are kids who have been sick and maybe the adults in their life don't want to talk about it with them, or don't want them to fixate on it. So if a kid sees this play and the take away is: 'hey, I also feel like my voice isn't heard, you're not alone, it's ok, it won't always feel this way...' I think that's pretty rad."

Tatum has previously worked with the Playhouse as the playwright of Off the Grid productions *Children of the Corn Maze* and Pod Play *The Aviators*, as well as working on Off the Hill productions in the past as a sound designer and composer.

Adapting a beloved and nostalgic story can be tricky. Yet, Tatum is very familiar with the process having previously worked on adaptations of *Jaws* and the *Scooby Doo* franchise for Queen City Flash, a production company he runs with partner Bridget Leak. In works like these, the act of adaptation is seen as what can be added to the story, rather than what can be cut.

"So much of my work is less about adaptation and more about playing in somebody else's sandbox and seeing what fun new ideas crop up and I guess that's where *Velveteen* led me," Tatum



says. Adaptations have the power to recontextualize dated classics, which is how this production of *The Velveteen Rabbit* – a story originally situated in the shadow of World War I and outbreaks of scarlet fever – feels fresh and relevant for contemporary audiences.

*The Velveteen Rabbit* will appear at various area community venues from Sept. 28 to Nov. 12. Appropriate for ages 5 and up, this is a tale of resilience, the power of love and the strength we can find in playing pretend.

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Off the Hill is made possible with support from **THE ROBERT AND ADELE SCHIFF FAMILY FOUNDATION** and **L&L NIPPERT CHARITABLE FOUNDATION**.

## ARTS AND CULTURE INCUBATOR

# LAUNCHING FULL SEASON OF PROGRAMS

One of the many advantages of the Playhouse's new mainstage theatre complex is the potential it provides to deepen our roots with the community and our artistic and cultural peers in innovative ways. In the spring, we established the Arts and Culture Incubator, which aims to achieve that by providing resources in our new facility to a selected group of local artists and organizations.

Likewise, the Resident Artists program, which is part of the Arts and Culture Incubator, supports a small group of Cincinnati-based theatre artists in the same way.

Our Incubator partners will hold free or low-cost events at the Playhouse on the second and fourth Mondays from September – June. The events are open to the public and span a wide range of topics and styles. Last season, our partners offered live podcast recordings, a series of panels featuring local Black artists, staged readings of

interactive plays, and professional development workshops on making art profitable. You can expect events like these and more in the coming season!

Arts and Culture Incubator Resident Artists are Curtis D. Shepard, Derek J. Snow and Queen City Flash. The community organizations are Cincinnati Music Accelerator, Cincinnati Pride, DuWap's Cincinnati Poetry Slam, Elevated Aerials, Heroes Rise, Urban Native Collective and Young Professionals Choral Collective.

Visit [cincyplay.com/tickets/special-events](https://cincyplay.com/tickets/special-events) for information on upcoming Arts and Culture Incubator events.

Visual by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.

The Markley Family presents

# RING OF FIRE: THE MUSIC OF JOHNNY CASH

Created by RICHARD MALTBY, JR.

Conceived by WILLIAM MEADE

Directed by MARCIA MILGROM DODGE

Moe and Jack's Place — The Rouse Theatre

**AUG. 26 – OCT. 1, 2023**

## STAGING A LEGEND

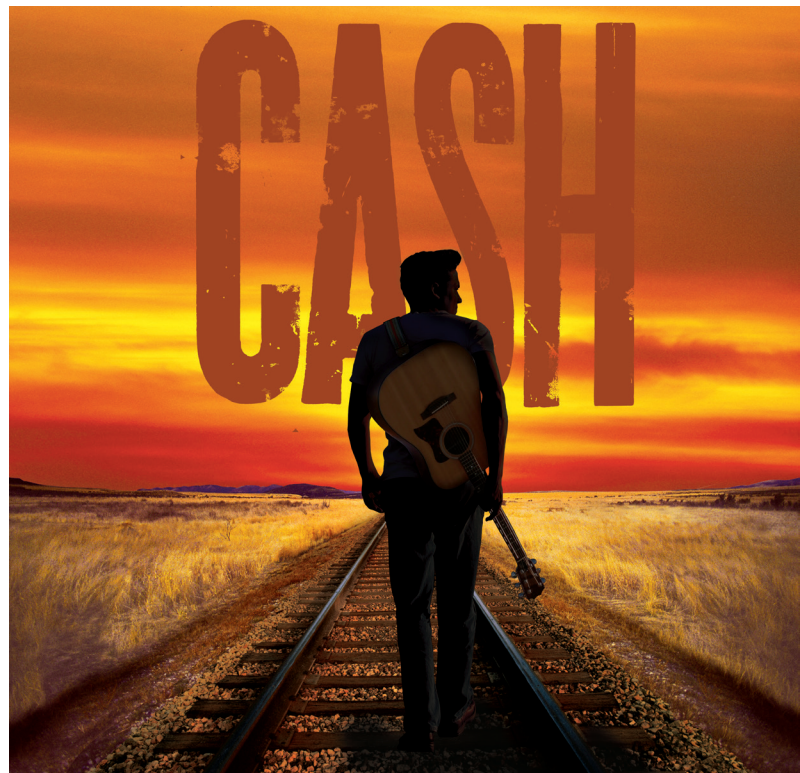
By Tatiana Godfrey

Johnny Cash: the myth, the legend, the man. Spanning multiple genres and decades, the music of Johnny Cash embodies and reflects an American spirit that will be celebrated with Playhouse audiences in our first production of the 2023-24 season, *Ring of Fire: The Music of Johnny Cash*. Although some audiences might remember our 2015 mounting of this musical, this current production boasts a revamped script, a new cast, a new director, and takes place in our brand-new theatre space – Moe and Jack's Place — The Rouse Theatre.

The musical first premiered in 2006 at New York's Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Featuring over 30 songs from Cash's discography, creator of the piece, Richard Maltby, Jr., said of *Ring of Fire*:

Johnny Cash's biography wasn't the most important story available to tell. ... It's an almost mythic American tale – of growing up in simple, dirt-poor surroundings in the heartland of America, leaving home, traveling on wings of music, finding love, misadventure, success, faith, redemption, and the love of a good woman – and eventually returning home. ... That seemed to be a worthy story to put on a stage – and the best part is we could tell it entirely in the songs. In many ways Johnny Cash wrote and sang about the lives we all lead, regardless of where we lead them. If, watching this show, you feel yourself being drawn back to your roots, it isn't accidental – even if you've forgotten what those roots are.

Originally structured for eight actor-musicians and a band, this new version of the script and orchestrations, which Maltby premiered at Milwaukee Rep in 2013, has been pared down to five actors who play their own instruments, making the script more intimate and personal. This intimate experience is supported in our production by the new Rouse Theatre, in which seats are closer to the stage, bringing audience members closer to the action.



This re-invention also brings a new point of view on Cash and his work by way of Tony Award-nominated director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge. Playhouse audiences will remember Dodge's direction from our productions of *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* (2020), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2017), *The Secret Garden* (2015) and *Cabaret* (2013). After three years of global change, including the building of a brand-new Cincinnati Playhouse theatre complex, Dodge is excited to bring a new experience to a new Playhouse. She sat down with us for an interview about our new production of *Ring of Fire*. The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

### How would you describe your relationship with and connection to Johnny Cash and his music?

I didn't really have a relationship with Cash and his music before this. I mean, I was familiar with some of the iconic songs: "Folsom Prison [Blues]," "I've Been Everywhere" and "Jackson." Just sort of the top 10 playlist. So, what we're doing is navigating the influence Cash had on American country, rockabilly, rock and roll, and gospel of the last 60 years, and it opens it up to new interpretations of classic songs. With our cast of five super-star actor-musicians, we can make new discoveries with the poetry of Cash and the music that thrills generations.

I'm really influenced by Adam Lambert's rendering of "Ring of Fire" and the Brandi Carlile version of "Folsom Prison [Blues]." And we have a whole list of contemporary artists who adopted Cash into their DNA and that's what we're hoping to do with our production. Give it new, vital, meaningful life for 2023 and some of it's gonna be familiar and some of it's gonna be challenging.

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RUNNING TIME An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Aug. 25.

CONTENT ADVISORY *Ring of Fire: The Music of Johnny Cash* is suitable for teenage and adult audiences. This musical celebrates the iconic Johnny Cash, featuring details of Johnny's career, covering topics such as substance abuse, guns, violence and murder.



Marcia Milgrom Dodge

**There are over 30 Johnny Cash songs in this musical that represent many decades and genres of music. What's your approach to staging/choreographing such a diverse canon?**

"Celebrate the music" is our mantra. Johnny Cash was first and foremost a storyteller—so we will honor his legacy by sharing the stories of his past, present and future. We're not in an environment that conjures anything that would be quaint or considered "period." We're in a modern or artful environment that celebrates Johnny as our kind of guiding force and angel over the production.

We have a magical set, designed by Chen-Wei Liao. I don't wanna tell you what the walls are because they kind of reveal themselves to the audience when it's the right moment for them to be revealed. I want people to sort of discover it. That's a really big thing. And the music is everything. We're tapping into aspects of Johnny Cash's personality: ferocity, tenderness, despair, all the themes of being human he encapsulated in his poetry of lyrics and his soul of music. So, we're gonna try to navigate inside of that and give every cast member an opportunity to convey different aspects of Johnny Cash.

And then we have a tribute to the Grand Ole Opry, which is where his career really catapulted. We're going to evoke that in a modern lens version of what the Grand Ole Opry represented. So, we'll have some throwbacks, let's say to some familiar iconic, gestures in costuming and in physical production. But really, it's about the instruments and the people, the way they relate to one another and relate to their instruments, and [how they] relate to the varied emotional landscape that Johnny Cash traverses.

**What's the vibe of this production and what excites you about it?**

The vibe is contemporary and impressionistic. No porches and rocking chairs here. Our production design is leaning into the muscular, modern styles of scenic art and costume fashion.

"We're tapping into aspects of Johnny Cash's personality: ferocity, tenderness, despair, all the themes of being human he encapsulated in his poetry of lyrics and his soul of music."

I know that I'm always excited to come back to the Playhouse and to navigate what is perceived as classic work and smuggling deeper meaning to that work. Anytime I say yes [to a project], I go into complete research mode. I've been listening to authentic recordings of Johnny Cash and, as I said, more contemporary interpretations of his music. It's a feast, you know.

So, I'm really excited about finding nuance and new meaning

in some of this material. My partner in crime in this is Leenya Rideout, who is our Music Director and also one of our female performers in the show. She's got a treasure trove of instrumentation, and we have a kind of female approach to this man centric musical. We are bringing a little bit of estrogen to it. We're being very mindful of some of the material that is a little trickier to navigate. So, assigning a particular performer to sing a song might give new insight into the lyrics and to the emotions of those songs.

**The title of this piece is *Ring of Fire*. Can we expect pyrotechnics in this production?**

I can't tell you that! LOL! You'll have to come to the theatre to find out!

**Who do you think should see this show and what do you hope they take away from it?**

I would never prescribe what an audience takes away—I leave that to them and their experience as an audience member. Each person who joins us in the darkened theatre to share space with Johnny Cash's legacy will bring their own relationships to the songs and they will land on each person in their own uniqueness. That said, I do hope they are entertained and hear the words of Cash in the context of living their lives today.

# SANCTUARY CITY

By MARTYNA MAJOK

Directed by KAREEM FAHMY

The Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre

**SEPT. 16 – OCT. 22, 2023**

Photo of Amira Danan and Jordan Arredondo on this page and on the cover by Tony Arrasmith/Arrasmith & Associates.

## VISITING THIS SANCTUARY CITY

By Tatiana Godfrey



### THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE SHOW

*Sanctuary City* is a searing drama set in New Jersey in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. It lovingly follows the relationship between two undocumented teenagers through high school. First premiering in New York in 2021, this play has been produced widely across the United States, offering insight and giving rise to conversations about the American experience. The playwright, Pulitzer Prize-winner Martyna Majok (pronounced “my-oak”), drew from her own experience as a Polish-born immigrant who was raised in New Jersey. Majok worked towards the characters feeling honest and true to her life experience. She commented in an interview with *DC Theater Arts*:

I want to invite people who are not from the world of the show to feel welcome in it. At the same time, for the folks that are from the world, I don't wanna pander, I don't wanna over-explain. I want someone who is from Jersey, from my high school, or with their parents to say, “that's right!” and not feel like I'm educating about my experience... I want both of those audience members to feel welcome in these stories.

### INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Director of the Playhouse's production of *Sanctuary City*, Kareem Fahmy, sat down with us for an interview about the show. The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

#### What do you love about *Sanctuary City*?

Gosh, so much. I love the characters. B and G are such compelling and unique characters. They feel so alive and nuanced and have so many different dimensions. I really love the dialogue. It's very sharp. It's very funny. It's very

moving. It captures a specific part of the world, Newark, New Jersey, in really clear ways. And then, it's a really interesting structural challenge, in terms of the way it's set up with the short scenes in the first part and then the more naturalistic scene at the end. There's a lot in there to love and admire and be impressed by. I've always found Martyna to be a real master.

#### How do you connect or relate to the play?

I relate to this play in a lot of ways. I'm not like B and G who are, at least for a part of the play, undocumented. But I'm an immigrant. I'm a person of color immigrant like they are, as well. I'm first generation Canadian. My parents are immigrants from Egypt. And then I, myself, had a very long and complicated journey to becoming a U.S. citizen. I came to the U.S. to go to school and then I tried to stay, and I found it surprisingly difficult, and spent about five years jumping through hoops trying to figure out how to stay in the country legally. I had a lot of complicated conversations about, how do I navigate the system? So, having lived the experience of a system that kind of wants to keep people out, I really relate to what the play is trying to say about the structures of this country when it comes to pathways to citizenship.

#### How do you balance the young, contemporary feeling of this play with the fact that it's set in New Jersey in the early 2000s? It's kind of like a period piece because the time and space are very specific.

Yeah, it's a total period piece. I think the thing that's interesting about it, that [Martyna] captures so well is the sort of post 9/11 reality. I mean the first several scenes are set right in the months after 9/11. I think that we can sometimes forget how much that sort

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MEDIA SPONSOR **CINCINNATI NEWS PUBLIC RADIO 191.7 WXII**

RUNNING TIME An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Sept. 15.

CONTENT ADVISORY *Sanctuary City* is suitable for teenage and adult audiences. Two young immigrants fight to find their place in the world while using very strong language and discussing mature issues including domestic abuse.



Kareem Fahmy

of shaped every sort of change in our understanding of protecting America. Like, The Department of Homeland Security didn't exist when 9/11 happened. That was a result of 9/11.

To me, I think that the story itself feels super contemporary because these issues around who gets to stay in the country, and why, and all that stuff hasn't changed that much. If anything, it's even more volatile with what's been happening over the last few years. I think what Martyna has done is really smart. [The play is] tracking the sort of immediate gut reaction to that change by setting it in 2001.

**Most of the plays you direct are contemporary plays. Can you comment on some trends that you see in plays that are coming out these days and about where *Sanctuary City* falls into this contemporary play canon?**

I think that there's a desire [for] every play to be super on theme for something going on in the world. Otherwise, it's not relevant. Like if you're an emerging playwright, it's harder to write just from a point of personal truth. You have to be writing about the world. I think that is sometimes really difficult, being a playwright myself, too. I'm like, "How am I speaking for my own personal truth while also trying to

say something about the world?" And what's the balance here? Is the play only gonna be relevant if it's speaking to a social problem? Particularly for writers from underrepresented communities.

What I think is so interesting about Martyna and *Sanctuary City*, in general, is that she does what I think the best contemporary plays do. She brings it down to the level of character. Yes, the play is about DREAMers and the play is about these pernicious policies that criminalize certain people being in the country illegally. But I'm not thinking and feeling my way through the play through that political lens. I'm really fixated on the characters and their experiences. I mean, I think that's why the play is resonant.

"I think it's important for the theatrical experience to feel really balanced for an audience. So, we're leaning into allowing the full humanity of the characters to emerge through how they use humor."

**What about the main characters, B and G, are so compelling? What draws you to them?**

Well, they're both so connected to each other but also incredibly alone. There's this line for me that keeps resonating in the play. B at one point says this entire, I'm paraphrasing here, but he talks about his entire existence being criminal. He's like, "I'm a criminal in the eyes of this country" and when you feel that way, like when you've been taught to feel your entire existence is criminal, which I super can relate to being a person from Middle Eastern

background and having come to the U.S. a couple of years after 9/11, it's difficult to feel grounded. It's difficult to feel grounded and safe. So, you know, B is grabbing onto G for the sense of safety.

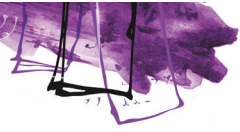
But she herself is on her own path towards self-actualization. She wants to take care of B and also wants to take care of herself. And she's been taught to be on the defense because she comes from this abusive background where her and her mother have been so severely abused by her mother's boyfriends. There's just so much there to hook into in terms of real lived experiences, a real history of trying to exist in a world where a lot of doors are shut for you and how two people can find themselves deeply connected.

**What do you hope audiences will take away from this production?**

With our production, we're really trying to live in this humor and the lightness and the beauty of the story and not the other parts of the story which are necessarily complicated and thorny and sometimes a little bit dark and sometimes a little bit sad. I think it's important for the theatrical experience to feel really balanced for an

audience. So, we're leaning into allowing the full humanity of the characters to emerge through how they use humor. I want an audience to have a good time no matter what the play is, you know, so I'm hoping that our production can balance the light and the dark of the play.

And it's also a very intimate space and such an intimate play, so it feels really well matched in terms of the audience being very, very close to these characters. So that level of empathy that gets to develop, I think will be really exciting. You know, you're not watching it from the remove. You're right there in their world.



## A YOUNG COUPLE LIVES THEIR VALUES THROUGH A LEGACY GIFT

By Lynn Smith, CFRE

Allison Gerrety and her husband, Spencer Burke, have chosen to leave a lasting impact on the arts by making a legacy gift to the Playhouse. Their shared passion for the arts, coupled with a forward-thinking mindset, has guided them towards this meaningful contribution.

Contrary to the common perception that legacy gifts are complex and time-consuming, Allison explained that it was a straightforward process for them. When she enrolled in her 401(k) plan at work, she simply selected the option to allocate a percentage of her funds to the Playhouse. "With just one click online, the gift was made, and I didn't even need to engage in a phone conversation," Allison said. Although the initial amount may seem modest, she believes that over the years, as the numbers grow, their impact will grow alongside it. "Leaving a legacy in the arts couldn't be more rewarding," she added.

There is an additional motive behind Allison and Spencer's decision to consider their legacy at such an early stage in life. They recently welcomed their first child into the world, which sparked their desire to secure the future of the Playhouse for the potential involvement of their son, Sylas. "We hope that one day, if he chooses, Sylas can be a part of the Playhouse," Allison said. The couple even dares to dream of seeing Sylas, whose middle name happens to be Timothy, grace the stage as Tiny Tim. "We are confident that the Playhouse will continue to serve as a cornerstone in the arts community for generations to come."

"Allowing the responsibility of parenthood to shape our values and aspirations for the future has been enlightening," Allison said. "We aspire to be a family that deeply appreciates and cherishes the arts. By making a legacy gift to the Playhouse, we are actively living out these values."



Spencer Burke and Allison Gerrety at the 2023 annual Morse Johnson Society dinner at the Playhouse.

## SECURE YOUR LEGACY

Building a legacy means creating something enduring that can be passed on. It's something anyone can do, at any stage of life. Individuals who make a future gift to the Playhouse through a will, trust or beneficiary designation become members of our legacy society, the Morse Johnson Society. This year, members of the Morse Johnson Society are being recognized with a seat plaque in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre.

**For more information, contact Lynn Smith, CFRE, Major Gifts Officer, at 513-977-2067.**