

MARCH – MAY 2025

PROLOGUE

LEADING LADIES presents
with Executive Producer **FIFTH THIRD BANK**

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY

By **KAREN ZACARÍAS**

A comedy about
books and the people
who love them.



THE TIES THAT BIND US TOGETHER



THE MARKLEY FAMILY presents

BIRTHDAY CANDLES

By **NOAH HAIDLE**

A charming new play
about motherhood, family,
finding your place — and a
delicious birthday cake.

ALSO INSIDE: WELCOME TO THE 2025-26 SEASON and SUMMER THEATRE CAMP

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Season marketing illustrations by Kenton Brett.

ABOUT PROLOGUE

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

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Season presented by



2024-25 Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre Season presented by
THE VONTZ FAMILY

Rouse Theatre Season Design Sponsor:

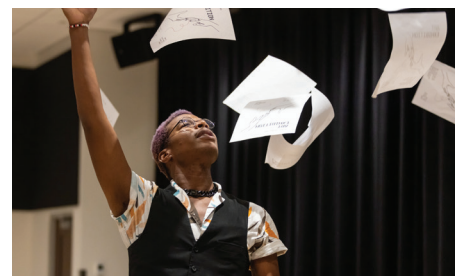


Seasonal support provided by



TRANSFORMATIVE SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS AND CULTURE INCUBATOR

By Mary Kay Koehler



Photos from Arts and Culture Incubator Events.

Since 2006, the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation has been a steadfast supporter of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, helping us grow and innovate as a leader in the arts. Most recently, the Haile Foundation played a pivotal role as the first donor to champion our Arts and Culture Incubator, which officially launched in the spring of 2023. Their early support made this groundbreaking program possible and helped us attract additional funders.

The Playhouse believes it is our responsibility to uplift the work of theatre artists and cultural peers by providing resources and support for their creative efforts. We do this through the Arts and Culture Incubator, which engages local and nationally recognized theatre-makers as well as small, non-profit cultural organizations based in our community.

The program uses our new state-of-the-art facility to provide resources to help elevate the work of our Incubator Partners and Resident Artists. They have access to Playhouse spaces at no cost for classes, rehearsals, creative work, networking, collaboration with their peers, public and private events, and performances, including the opportunity to workshop or present a staged reading of a work in progress. The Playhouse also provides professional development services crafted to meet each of their unique needs.

Theatre is, by nature, a collaborative art form. By opening our doors to our Incubator Partners and Resident Artists, we aim to deepen connections with our community and artistic peers in innovative and meaningful ways. This collaboration not only strengthens our organization but enriches the entire region by showcasing and supporting the extraordinary talents within our community.

"At the Haile Foundation, we believe in the power of the arts to bring people together, foster creativity, and build stronger communities. Supporting the Arts and Culture Incubator was an easy decision because it aligns perfectly with our desire to empower local organizations that are creating meaningful, lasting impact. We are excited to see how this program will uplift local artists and inspire collaboration throughout the region."

— Bernard L. McKay, President of the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation

Thanks to the Haile Foundation's leadership and belief in our vision, we are taking important steps toward building a more inclusive, dynamic and thriving cultural ecosystem. Together, we are fostering the next generation of artists and setting an example for how established organizations can inspire and empower creative growth.

DON'T MISS OUT!

Discover all the exciting Arts and Culture Incubator events at cincyplay.com on the Upcoming Public Events page.

WELCOME TO THE PLAYHOUSE'S 2025-26 SEASON!

Our 2025-26 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. The lineup truly embodies the Playhouse's mission to bring diverse, engaging works of great artistry to our community and to put Cincinnati's artistic excellence in the national spotlight.

MOE AND JACK'S PLACE — THE ROUSE THEATRE

Season presented by **Schueler Group**

MC and Tom Brennan and David C. Herriman Fund of Greater Cincinnati Foundation present

MYTHIC

Book and Lyrics by **MARCUS STEVENS**
Music by **ORAN ELDOR**

SEP. 20 – OCT. 19, 2025

Season Sponsor of New Work: **Mark and Nancy Dawes**

Making its U.S. premiere on its journey to Broadway, the ancient Greek myth of Persephone is turned on its ear as a pop-rock musical comedy. *Mythic* is directed and choreographed by nine-time Tony Award-nominee and three-time Tony Award-winner Kathleen Marshall.

First Financial Bank presents

A CHRISTMAS CAROL — SEASON EXTRA!

By **CHARLES DICKENS**
Adapted by **BLAKE ROBISON**

NOV. 21 – DEC. 28, 2025

The holiday story you love unfolds with dazzling set, costume and lighting designs to create a magical experience for your family!

Fifth Third Bank presents

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LITTLE WOMEN

Adapted by **LAUREN M. GUNDERSON**
From the novel by **LOUISA MAY ALCOTT**

JAN. 17 – FEB. 15, 2026

Sponsored by **Johnson Investment Counsel** and **Clark Schaefer Hackett**

Experience the classic novel you adore as it's being written in this playful and theatrical new adaptation that puts the author in the spotlight.

Leading Ladies presents

MRS. CHRISTIE

By **HEIDI ARMBRUSTER**

FEB. 28 – MARCH 29, 2026

The curious, real-life disappearance of Agatha Christie in 1926 sets the stage for this charming comedy as a devoted superfan tries to solve the case 100 years later.

Moe and Jack Rouse and Randolph Wadsworth present

AUGUST WILSON'S THE PIANO LESSON

APRIL 11 – MAY 3, 2026

A clash over the fate of a family's heirloom piano sets the stage for this explosive Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning masterpiece.

ROSENTHAL SHELTERHOUSE THEATRE

Season presented by **The Vontz Family**

WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE SEA

Written by **JEFF AUGUSTIN**
Music by **THE BENGSONS**

AUG. 30 – SEP. 28, 2025

Sponsored by **Digi and Mike Schueler**

Lyrical storytelling and live folk music weave an emotional tale of rediscovering love and the everlasting bond between a son and his Haitian immigrant father.

THE HEART SELLERS

By **LLOYD SUH**

OCT. 25 – NOV. 23, 2025

In this funny and moving new comedy, Asian immigrants Luna and Jane find friendship while preparing a turkey for their first American Thanksgiving in 1973.

Linda and Gary Greenberg present

BECAUSE YOU'RE MINE — SEASON EXTRA!

Created by **MATT CUSACK** and **ALLISON KELLY**

DEC. 3 – 23, 2025

Sponsored by **The Markley Family**

A celebration of the great loves and love songs of country music featuring songs from Johnny and June, George and Tammy and so many more!

MARY'S WEDDING

By **STEPHEN MASSICOTTE**

FEB. 7 – MARCH 8, 2026

In this poetic romantic drama, a young couple discover the thrill of first love on the eve of World War I.

Ellen and Ray van der Horst present

TENDERLY: THE ROSEMARY CLOONEY MUSICAL

Based on the life of **ROSEMARY CLOONEY**
By **JANET YATES VOGT** and **MARK FRIEDMAN**

MARCH 21 – MAY 17, 2026

This exhilarating and inspiring musical biography features many signature songs and offers a personal portrait of one of the most beloved entertainers of all time.

Season ticket packages start with as few as three shows. Visit **CINCYPLAY.COM**.

Season ticket holders get first access to *A Christmas Carol* and *Because You're Mine*, but those two shows are not part of any season ticket package.

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY

By KAREN ZACARÍAS

Directed by BLAKE ROBISON

Moe and Jack's Place — The Rouse Theatre

MARCH 22 – APRIL 20, 2025

WIT, JOY AND NOVELS GALORE

By Russell Florence Jr.



Karen Zacarías' *The Book Club Play*, a comedy celebrating literature and friendship, brings amusing enlightenment to the joy of reading and the prickliness of spirited debate.

Deep bonds both sincere and territorial provide engaging fuel as the play focuses on the members of a close-knit book club who become the subjects of a documentary filmmaker. Add in the unexpected arrival of a provocative new member, and the foundation of the group's long-standing dynamics unravel with hilarious results.

The Book Club Play had its world premiere in 2008 at Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, and had a sold-out run at the Playhouse in 2013 in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse, directed by the Playhouse's Osborn Family Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison. The play has since become a hit at numerous theatres across the country including Arena Stage, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Horizon Theatre Company, North Carolina Stage and Dallas Theater Center, among others.

The upcoming Playhouse production in Moe and Jack's Place — The Rouse Theatre is again directed by Robison. "When I directed the play in my inaugural season here, book clubs heard about the play and came in droves and then spread the word to others," said Robison. "I think that now, more than ever, we need to laugh at ourselves a bit. So, it seems like the right moment to create a new production on the larger Rouse Theatre stage, bringing the laughs to a widespread audience."

Robison has been connected with *The Book Club Play* for 17 years and has a great fondness for the material. "It's one of those scripts that makes me laugh out loud — and that's always a good sign," he said. "I love all the characters and see parts of myself in them. They are good enough friends to tease and challenge each other. To disagree and still love each other. We have to treasure those friendships."

The Book Club Play is intentional in its comedic impulses, but Zacarías

specifically states in the script's production notes that it is not a farce. Robison is aware of the challenges to stage comedy that doesn't tilt toward the excessive. "You've got to ride the line," he said. "Comedy happens when characters take their (absurd) circumstances very seriously and act in outrageous ways. But ultimately *The Book Club Play* is about relationships, not slamming doors and mistaken identity. There are some very heartfelt moments in the play. I want to capture both the comedy and the pathos."

He's also eager to reexplore the play's documentary framework. "The script is structured as outtakes from a documentary film," Robison said. "The mysterious Danish film auteur, Lars Knudsen, has filmed their book club and turned it into a reality show of sorts. It's a fun challenge to create this unusual framework on stage."

One of the most interesting exchanges in the play concerns the megahit *Twilight* series. The notion that "popularity is not quality" stirs emotions among the group and keeps the action flavorful in terms of titles. "Because this is a welcoming play about community, I wanted to pick books that were big enough in our culture that even if someone had not read them, they would have an idea of the plot or tone," Zacarías said. "The fact that we start with American classics like *Moby Dick* and *The Age of Innocence* but end up with more popular blockbusters is a delightful trajectory for me."

As Robison excitedly revisits *The Book Club Play*, he hopes the script's relatable essence will entertain and connect with audiences. "I hope people will see themselves and their friends in these characters," he said. "It's fun to experience the play with your own book club! Or just with your loved ones."

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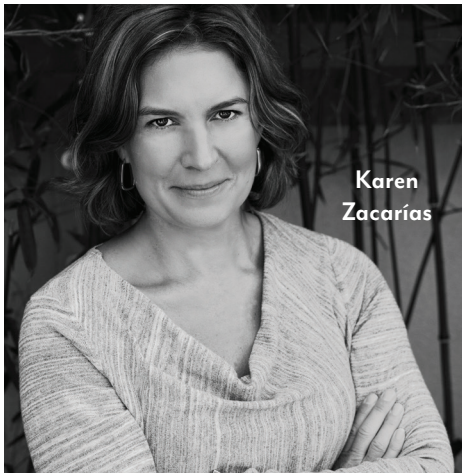
An accurate running time will be posted on our website on March 21.

CONTENT ADVISORY

The Book Club Play is recommended for older teenager and adult audiences. Using only mild adult language, some (very funny) book discussions reference identity, sex and maybe ... sparkly vampires?

INSIDE THE CLUB: An Interview with Karen Zacarías

By Russell Florence Jr.



Playhouse Associate Artist Karen Zacarías' lifelong love of books gives credence to her aptly titled *The Book Club Play*. A humorous tale of entangling opinions startled by a new voice, the play brings renewed focus to the importance of reading and putting reading into action. The Washington D.C.-based playwright shares reflections on her play, including how impactful it has been to be in a book club for more than 20 years.

Have you always had a fondness for books? What are some of your favorite books?

I loved reading as a child. In fact, *Charlotte's Web* was my favorite book because that beautiful spider became a good writer and a good friend ... my life goal. Other books that had a profound effect on me: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Age of Innocence* and *Shane*.

What inspired you to write a play about a book club? Have you been in any book clubs? If so, what were they like?

I've been in a fabulous co-ed book club for 25 years. It's a sanctuary to talk, laugh and connect to deeper themes with friends. It also can manifest some drama and intense group dynamics.

Is there a particular character in the play you feel most connected to?

I think all three of the women characters embody a part of me.

What was the impetus for the documentary framework? Why did you choose such a framing device?

I love physics and am fascinated by the notion that a particle changes its behavior and course when being watched. The idea of people being aware that they are being watched and then forgetting allows for greater vulnerability and chaos and comedy.

Throughout the play the characters reveal many fascinating layers. For example, Alex, who shares insights on his views of what a "cultured person" should be. In what ways did you enjoy being able to showcase varying facets of the characters?

I love each and every character in this play... and I love that audience members tend to identify with one. This play has had a great following over the years, and I will have people come to me in the

lobby and say "Oh, I'm the Ana in my group. Or I'm Rob." It really does feel like they are people we all know.

How does it feel to have had so many well received productions of *The Book Club Play* over the years? Why do you think it resonates so universally?

I think it's because it celebrates friendship and connection. It's a comedy, but it's also a celebration of the small pleasures that we hold dear. After COVID, the idea of being able to sit with friends in a living room and really talk is something to treasure.

You and Blake Robison have a long-time working partnership. What does having such a familiar working relationship bring to the production process?

I love working with Blake. He is so supportive and yet pushes me to go beyond my comfort zone. I am so grateful to Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park for being my artistic home and a playground for new stories and ideas. I am so proud to be a part of this theatre.

What do you hope Playhouse audiences take away from *The Book Club Play* experience?

How important it is to talk about art and stories with people you love. *The Book Club Play* is really an ode to live theatre.

SPECIAL EVENTS

READ BETWEEN THE WINES BOOK CLUB

Join us in reading and discussing the same books that spark spirited debate in the play at our pre-show Read Between the Wines Book Club events. Each one includes wine, hors d'oeuvres and a fun book discussion facilitated by a member of the Playhouse staff. Doors open at 6 p.m., and the discussion runs 6:15 to 7 p.m. in the Kaplan Lobby. Cost is \$25 per person, per event, which includes two glasses of wine. To reserve your spot in the Book Club, call the Box Office at 513-421-3888 or visit cincyplay.com.

- *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville: Wednesday, April 2 with Tatiana Godrey
- *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton: Tuesday, April 8 with Katie Baskerville
- *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer: Friday, April 11 with Kathy Neus
- *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown: Thursday, April 17 with Piper N. Davis

BOOK SWAP

Who loves a free book? Who needs to clean off their bookshelves? Who keeps adding to their to-read pile when it's already too high? The answer is everyone who loves books, and we are here to enable your book habit! During *The Book Club Play*, we are hosting a Book Swap in the lobby. Just bring a book or two to contribute to the stock, then browse and take a new one home.

THE MARKLEY FAMILY presents

BIRTHDAY CANDLES

By NOAH HAIDLE

Directed by JOANIE SCHULTZ

Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre

APRIL 19 – MAY 18, 2025

AGING GRACEFULLY

By Tatiana Godfrey

Noah Haidle's *Birthday Candles* isn't your typical birthday celebration. It's a poignant, often hilarious, and ultimately profound exploration of life, death and the fleeting nature of time — all wrapped up in the ritual of baking a birthday cake. Commissioned by the Detroit Public Theatre, this play premiered in 2018 and subsequently enjoyed a successful Broadway run at the Roundabout Theatre Company, captivating audiences with its intimate exploration of aging, family and the search for meaning.

The play's structure forms the bedrock of its impact. Haidle presents a series of vignettes, each focusing on a significant birthday in the life of the main character Ernestine Ashworth. From her teenage years to her 107th year, her birthday is marked by the ritual of baking a cake. These snapshots offer glimpses into the joys and sorrows of marriage, the complexities of parenthood, and the bittersweet nature of aging. We see Ernestine navigate the challenges of raising children, the grief of losing loved ones, and the enduring power of friendship. As Ernestine ages, she grapples with the inevitability of mortality and the question of whether her life has amounted to anything. Through her journey, Haidle reminds us that life is filled with both joy and sorrow, and that even in the face of loss and disappointment, moments of beauty and grace can be found.

This upcoming production in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre is directed by Joanie Schultz. Schultz will be familiar to audiences not only as the Associate Artistic Director of the Playhouse, but as the director of last season's *Vietgone* and *Dracula*, and the previous season's *Origin Story* and *Frida...A Self Portrait*. Schultz has been excited to direct this play since she first encountered it:

"I read this play in early 2020, right before the pandemic.

I was reading plays at the time for the Cleveland Play House, helping them read and assess the multitude of plays that come across a regional theatre's artistic office. This play stopped me in my tracks. I haven't read anything like it before or since. It made me feel the awe of what it is to be alive. I laughed, I cried. I have been a fan of Noah Haidle's work since my twenties, but this piece in particular



has encapsulated what it means to live a life and how simultaneously large and small each of our lives is. I've wanted to direct this play ever since and am so excited for the opportunity to bring it to life on stage."

Schultz is particularly interested in the play's inherent theatricality. In essence, *Birthday Candles* isn't just a story told on stage; it's a story that is of the stage. Its structure, its language, and its focus on ritual and transformation make it inherently theatrical, demanding and rewarding a dynamic and imaginative production. Schultz explained:

"Noah Haidle has been adopted by the Thornton Wilder family as carrying the torch of Wilder's work. As far as the great classic American playwrights, I think Wilder is the most 'theatrical,' by which I mean he utilizes the theatre as its medium — using metaphor and imagination to create the world of his plays. Haidle does just this: he's made something that is truly theatre — the simple language of the stage and suspension of disbelief asked of us is juxtaposed with the actual activity of making a birthday cake live on stage."

Schultz' immediate connection to *Birthday Candles* underscores the play's emotional depth and universal themes. This production is an invaluable opportunity to witness a powerful theatrical work that celebrates the beauty and fragility of life, reminding us of the significance found in seemingly ordinary moments. It is an experience that will resonate deeply with audiences and leave a lasting impression.

**"A truly must-see show.
Epic and beautifully written."**

New York Daily News

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RUNNING TIME

An accurate running time will be posted on our website on April 18.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Birthday Candles is recommended for older teenage and adult audiences. Using a bit of strong adult language, the play celebrates life and the pain and beauty that comes with it — from serious illness, loss and grief to love, sex, family and birthday cake.

A CENTURY IN THE MAKING: An Interview with Joanie Schultz

By Tatiana Godfrey



Joanie
Schultz

Birthday Candles, by Noah Haidle, presents a unique theatrical experience; we had the opportunity to speak with the production's director, Joanie Schultz, about her interpretation of Haidle's captivating work.

What about the play excites you as a director?

Birthday Candles is the kind of theatre I love, although it manifests in different ways in different productions, it's what I call mythic realism. The play is rooted in truth and honesty and human needs and intentions, but also with moments of something larger than life, it's a little magical, metaphysical even. Also, there's a sense of play in the piece, which is something I love in creating and experiencing theatre.

We see Ernestine, the main character, from ages 17 to 107 during the course of the play. What did you look for during auditions when casting this role?

I looked for a fabulous actress that would be fun to make this play with. Someone with humor and depth and a sense of play. Barbara Chisholm, who Playhouse audiences will be familiar with, is such a fantastic actress, and I know she's going to bring all of these things out in Ernestine. The roles are challenging for the entire ensemble because we drop into different birthdays — they are

different ages and in vastly different places in their lives each time we meet them. While it's Ernestine's life, one of the joys of this play is creating this world and how it will function with the group of people involved. I'm certain each production of *Birthday Candles* will be so different and unique.

I don't think it's a spoiler to say that a cake gets baked over the course of the show. How do you navigate actual food preparation that will need to happen live every night? What does that mean for props and what does that mean for the actors who have to make the cake?

Well, every night she makes a cake! We will have the ingredients on hand, we have a working oven on stage, and mostly, our incredible crew will need to do a lot of clean up after!

What are the aesthetic vibes of the show? How is design supporting storytelling here?

This play is full of so many big ideas, and it took a lot of work on the creative team's part to distill them into our design. So much of it is a kind

of impressionism — what makes this house what it is over 90 years? What are its essential parts? Along with that, we wanted to be able to zoom in on these moments where we drop into the family's life, and also be able to zoom out and see the largeness of the universe. So, there are some very real things in the design without pinning it down and making it too grounded to one place and time.

The play takes place over the span of almost a century; audiences are sitting through a 90-minute show. How do you reconcile those two timelines for the actors and for the audience?

I have this friend who I was roommates with many years ago and every year on her birthday she would go through the exercise of remembering all of her previous birthdays: Who were they with? Where was she? I tried, but without having gone through this experience before, I could only remember some of them. Why did I remember them? Some are obvious because big things happened, but some are just...because. Something stuck with me. I think of the play this way. It's not a memory, but it's also not every single birthday. Sometimes we go through three years and see each of them quickly, sometimes we skip 21 years and then live in that moment. And that's how time is, yes? Or at least our perception of it. Some years fly by and others last forever. I love this quality of the play; it's a lifetime condensed in a very truthful depiction.

What do you hope audiences will take away from your production of *Birthday Candles*?

The play begins with the question "Have I wasted my life?" and the rest of the play seems to answer that question through the unfolding of a life that is certainly not wasted. I hope the audience reflects that back on themselves, as I have in working on it, and sees the beauty and value of each and every one of their lives. I don't believe there's a way to waste your life — each of our lives is valuable and rich.



Barbara
Chisholm

Barbara Chisholm plays Ernestine. Playhouse audiences will remember her from *Misery*, *Erma Bombeck: At Wit's End* and *Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help*.





SET THE STAGE AT SUMMER CAMP!

By Kit Gladieux

Summer is just around the corner, and with it comes the Playhouse's yearly summer theatre camp offerings for kids and teens. This year, the Playhouse is offering eight weeks of fun-filled opportunities for campers to explore their creativity and develop their theatrical knowledge. This summer's programs consist of one-week theatre camps and showcases, as well as two- and three-week performance academies.

The one-week theatre camps let campers explore the fundamentals of creating theatre, focusing on specific skills such as playwriting, stage combat, musical theatre, acting and more, while the showcases focus on performance and storytelling styles. Each session features a unique theme, such as *Wicked*, *Minecraft*, *Moana* or *Percy Jackson*.

For young artists seeking more immersion into the world of theatre, two- and three-week performance academies stage a full-length play or musical. With daily rehearsals, they work together to bring the production to life, culminating in a final performance that includes limited costumes and set pieces. This summer's performance academies include *Disney's Frozen KIDS* and *The Lion King KIDS* for younger campers, and *Aliens vs. Cheerleaders* and *Beetlejuice JR.* for tweens and teens.

Campers will not only grow as performers, but as people. In the Playhouse's inclusive and artistic environment, campers will tap into their creativity and build confidence both on and off the stage. "The campers grow every single week, and we see it. A camper who comes in on the first day of a five-day camp is not the same camper who leaves on Friday," says Ariana Moses, the Playhouse's Education Director. "They've made friendships, they've formed a community, they've learned new skills, and they've put together something to show their family and friends."

Summer Camp programming options are available at the Playhouse's theatre complex in Mt. Adams, Mason Community Center and the Ignite Institute in Erlanger, Kentucky, with opportunities for campers entering grades one through 12. Programs will begin on June 2 and run through August 1.

For more information on the 2025 summer camp offerings, visit cincyplay.com/learn/summer-theatre-camps or call the Box Office at 513-421-3888.



Photos from Summer Camp by Mikki Schaffner.