

# YOUR NEIGHBORS



Photo courtesy Alexandria Hill/Florida Studio Theatre

Christine Hopkins, Siena Tonini, Caroline Jackson, Estella Viers, Denée Lortz, Eliza Radford, Nya Chambliss, Hannah Bagnall and Maggie Layman

## Girls empowerment takes center stage

FST's youth acting class presents a play about girls unapologetically being themselves.

**SHANE DONGLASAN**  
COMMUNITY REPORTER

**W**hen Christine Hopkins, director of education at Florida Studio Theatre, was trying to think of a final project for her Youth Acting III class, she was at a loss.

Then it came to her.

This year's class was made up of girls fiercely proud of their individuality, and Hopkins wanted to put together a project to reflect that.

"I just wanted something that was meaningful to them," Hopkins said. "They are all so individual and so proud of being individual that I thought, 'How do I do this?' They are amazing and have so much personality."

The answer came in the form of a book by photographer Kate T. Parker, "Strong is the New Pretty," a collection of photos and stories about the strength and spirit of girls being themselves.

Kate Alexander, associate director-at-large of FST, suggested the book to Hopkins, who fell in love with its message.

"Even though it's a book of photos and quotes, I knew there was a play in there," she said.

Each week, the class discussed a theme from the book, such as kindness, confidence and silliness.

"We went through the book

page by page and got to hear their opinions about celebrating their weirdness," said Denée Lortz, a teaching artist at FST who taught the class with Hopkins. "That's a beautiful thing to come together and be passionate about our individuality."

"It was also amazing to witness girls at this age be so empathetic toward other females."

Hopkins recruited actress and playwright Natalie Symons to write the play. Symons attended a few classes to get to know the girls in the class, who were between 8 and 11 years old.

*"That's a beautiful thing to come together and be passionate about our individuality."*

— Denée Lortz, FST teaching artist

"What excited me about this project, especially during this time and climate of celebrating strong young women, is that it's female-driven," Symons said. "I wanted to find a fictional story they would be excited to tell. I talked to the girls a lot about animals, which inspired the story for the play."

Symons weaved together quotes from Parker's book and the girls' own stories and experiences to write the play, "Schooney's Home for Girls and John."

The play's narrative centers on a group of orphaned girls under the care of Schooney, played by Lortz, and how they uplift each

other and rely on one another to save a baby dinosaur from getting into the wrong hands. At the heart of the play is a message that resonated with each girl.

"Each of us can be different, and that's OK," said Eliza Radford, who played Margo, a wheelchair-bound girl with juvenile arthritis and an unwavering sense of positivity. "I liked learning about all the girls and their true spirit."

Each girl said they felt a connection to their characters, whether it was sharing their character's love of books or capacity for forgiveness.

The girls also got to pick their characters' own names and had input into what their costumes should look like.

"The play shows that you don't have to be a boy to do whatever you want," said Nya Chambliss, who played Kehrena, an 8-year-old who gets teased by the other girls for acting like she's 80. "I just wanna show girls that boys don't boss you around, and they don't rule the world."

Fellow cast member Siena Tonini added, "I realized so many people cared about making a play about girls empowerment."

The class presented the play April 3 to a private audience of friends and family and performed for a public audience April 6 at FST's Keating Theatre.

"I'd like for the play and the conversation around girls' empowerment to extend into our community," said Hopkins. "The goal is not to keep it here but to spread it."



Wednesday, March 28, 2018

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## HARROWING MEMORIES



Actor David Sitler, left, and 12th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Charles E. Williams listen as former Marine Steven Schaefer talks about his experiences in the Vietnam War during a Monday panel discussion at Florida Studio Theatre. [HERALD-TRIBUNE PHOTO / CARLA VARISCO]

### Vietnam veteran who helped with 'The Things They Carried' shares his traumatic experiences

By Billy Cox  
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**S**ARASOTA — One of the most devastating moments in "The Things They Carried," the Vietnam war play running at Florida Studio Theatre through April 13, unfolds when the narrator of Tim O'Brien's autobiographical novel fields a

question posed by his daughter: Did you kill anyone when you were over there?

For actor David Sitler, who carries the entire load of trauma and revelation in the one-man stage adaptation, merely delivering O'Brien's lines as his character contemplates his victim —

See THINGS. A8



A U.S. Marine stands with his head bowed in January 1968, as other Marines carry the body of a comrade through a rice paddy to a helicopter evacuation point in Vietnam.



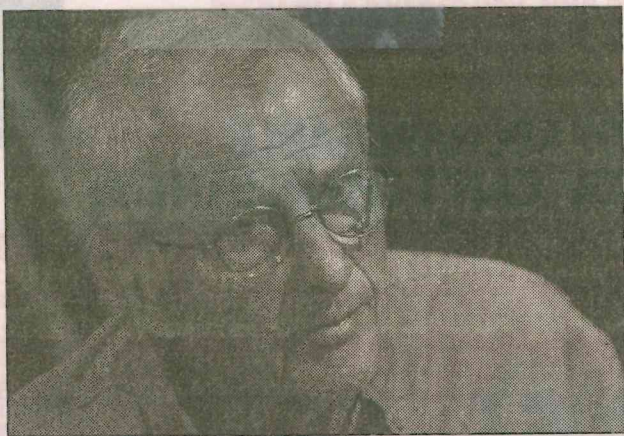
# THINGS

From Page A1

"His jaw is in his throat, his upper lip and teeth are gone, his one eye is shut, his other eye is a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows are thin and arched like a woman's, his nose is undamaged" — wouldn't cut it. He had to hear it, firsthand, from someone who had endured a similar encounter.

Enter Steven Schaefer, a retired public defender, environmentalist, and Marine Corps Vietnam veteran who agreed to go public with what he'd shared with Sitler weeks earlier.

In a remarkable FST forum moderated by 12th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Charles Williams on Monday evening at Bowne's Theatre Lab, Schaefer joined Sitler to



Steven Schaefer talks about his experiences in Vietnam during a panel discussion about the war and the play "The Things They Carried" on Monday evening at Florida Studio Theatre. [HERALD-TRIBUNE PHOTOS / CARLA VARISCO]

discuss what he's been living with every single day since 1966. The Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient's unsparing candor was evident even before he took a seat. In the brief program bio he submitted for the event, Schaefer wrote, "After 20 years of drinking, losing jobs, and trying to justify what he did in Vietnam,

he married a fine woman and went to law school."

Unable to watch last year's Ken Burns PBS documentary series on Vietnam and reluctant to attend the play, Schaefer did read O'Brien's book and found it sufficient. Williams, Schaefer's former colleague in the public defender's office and current golf-course partner, described "The Things" as "a fantastic performance," but also as so intense at times that "I'm glad my friend didn't have to sit through it."

A lymphoma survivor who suspects his cancer, now in remission, is linked to either contaminated water at Camp Lejeune or exposure to Agent Orange, Schaefer told a packed house that he went 20 years without talking about the war, and that he had to take a Xanax to settle his nerves before the forum. In halting and measured tones, Schaefer said, "I don't find these conversations easy."

At 21, he said, "in a platoon of 50 people I was probably older than 48 of them." Casualty patterns tended to emerge around the new arrivals or veterans on the verge of rotating out, so he picked his buddies carefully. He knew nothing of the politics or history behind the mission. He was told if America didn't "stop the gooks" in Vietnam, "they were going to be raping our sisters in San Francisco." Depersonalizing the enemy was a critical component of initiation: "You don't want to be out there trying to kill human beings."

Schaefer's first kill was



Actor David Sitler, furthest, who stars in "The Things They Carried" at Florida Studio Theatre, and former Marine Steven Schaefer, center, participate in a Monday forum about the play and the Vietnam War, moderated by 12th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Charles E. Williams, closest, at FST.

at a checkpoint designed to stop Vietnamese for identification papers. One man balked and took off. Schaefer yelled for him to stop in what Schaefer thought was Vietnamese. "He kept running so I fired a shot at him, not meaning to hit him, but I caught him in the back of the head."

He approached his victim. The man had a valid ID in his hand.

"I rolled that man over; he was legal — I had killed him," Schaefer said. He paused. Williams raised his own microphone, ready to speak if Schaefer needed help. "I will never forget the appearance of his brains coming out the back of his head ... looking like cream of wheat."

There were two more. They were Viet Cong machine-gunners, in the jungle, opening up on the Marines in the middle of the night. Schaefer followed the flashes and took both of them out. He got part of his scalp taken off by exploding shrapnel. He and a wounded buddy were airlifted to a hospital in Da Nang.

The next morning, "A couple of guys in the squad brought me the wallet of one of the people I killed." Schaefer kept his thumb and forefinger spaced apart, the distance of a small photo. "And there was a picture of his wife and daughter." He, Sitler and Williams dropped their gazes to the floor. Schaefer shook

his head vigorously. "You don't." Williams reached over and consoled Schaefer with a pat to the back. "You don't ... that shouldn't happen to anybody."

Like Tim O'Brien's narrator, Schaefer is a lifelong hostage to the little details. Like what happened to a Marine colleague named Peterson, "the first man I watched die."

"He got shot here," Schaefer pointed to his chest, "I was this close," pointing to Sitler sitting next to him. "Some sniper shot him in the flak jacket, it killed him like that," a snap of the fingers. "He was dead before he hit the ground."

"I can remember that river, I can remember that grass, I can remember the side of that hill, I can remember the stretcher (that) got him to the helicopter. But one of my strongest memories of that day was his foot, when we were going to the helicopter, his foot catching the ground. And I kept lifting him up, scared that I was hurting him ... and he was dead!"

If a pin had dropped, it would have clattered.

"And I'm not ... you, you cannot send an 18- or 19-year-old out to kill people without it affecting them for the rest of their lives. You can't ..." Schaefer caught his breath. "You have no idea what it's like to go up and roll a body over of the first

man you shot."

This is what Sitler asked for. Now a crowd of strangers is in on it as well.

Sitler quoted a motto from one of his superheroes from childhood, Spider-Man, "with great powers comes great responsibility. And during the play," he said, "I feel the same way, and I'm very humbled to be in this play." He shared a story about a patron who saw the production and used it as an opening to discuss Vietnam, for this first time, with his veteran brother.

During audience questions, a man in the back identified himself as an infantry lieutenant who survived Vietnam: "What Steven has just done was one of the most moving, power presentations — and I feel so indebted to him, he showed a lot of courage in Vietnam and I think what he has just done is even more courageous."

Another listener who missed the draft by two years wanted to know what those who weren't there might do to make it better. Schaefer initially said it was all "water under the bridge," but then mentioned rising tensions with North Korea. He ended with a plea "to not put our children in those situations. And if we can work toward that," he said, "that would make me feel great."



# No show can step on 'Blue Suede Shoes'

By Jay Handelman

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If another show hadn't been booked into the Court Cabaret, Florida Studio Theatre's original musical revue "Mack the Knife: The Bobby Darin Musical," might have become the longest-running show in the theater's history.

But that record will now be set by the still-running and much-extended "Blue Suede Shoes," a revue built around songs from the early days of rock 'n' roll that highlights the intersecting influences of black and white artists in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Blue Suede Shoes" has now been extended through April 22, and will surpass last season's long-running hit "Piano Men," which had topped the list at 193 performances.

"Mack the Knife" and "Blue Suede Shoes" join such other FST cabaret hits as "American Pie," "Yesterday," "Soul Mates: A Journey



Gabe Aronson learned to play lead guitar for his role in the Florida Studio Theatre cabaret show "Blue Suede Shoes."

[FST PHOTO / MATTHEW HOLLER]

to Hitsville" and two shows featuring the fictional "Prima Donettes" that all used rock and pop hits from the 1950s to the 1970s to build devoted audiences.

See CABARET, E5



# CABARET

Continued from E1

"We have the baby boomer audience coming full throttle into the theaters," said Rebecca Hopkins, the managing director who helps create most of the cabaret shows with her husband, Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins. "They really connect to this music. The music of the '60s and '70s is obviously touching their memory. They have emotional anchors to it."

It's a shift from the early days of the cabaret series, which had shows built around songs by such songwriters as Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen and Irving Berlin.

Over the last few years, the Hopkins have realized the cabaret audience has a broader range of taste now.

"When we first started with the golden era standards, that audience would have rebelled against 'Blue Suede Shoes,'" Richard Hopkins said. "The Beatles thing we did, 'British Invasion,' didn't work as well the first time. We had to soften our approach to that, to make it more accessible to the audience, but when we last did it, as 'Yesterday,' we could rock out more. The audience has evolved into the 21st century. That's fantastic for us in the cabaret."

Richard Hopkins said that finding a story to connect the songs and give them relevance is important, particularly with the rock era songs, which don't always have strong narratives in the lyrics.

Audiences also respond well to productions that feature singers who play musical instruments, as they do in many of the longer-running shows.

For "Blue Suede Shoes," directed by Catherine Randazzo, some of the



From left, Nygel Robinson, Jannie Jones, Joe Casey and Gabe Aronson star in the Florida Studio Theatre cabaret show "Blue Suede Shoes." [FST PHOTO / MATTHEW HOLLER]

performers had to learn new instruments or develop better instrumental skills.

Gabe Aronson, for example, has played the piano for years and "kind of picked up drums along the way. But one thing new for this was playing lead guitar." Nygel Robinson plays many instruments, but never tried electric bass before this production. Both said they feel much more comfortable with the new instruments after

more than 100 performances of the show.

The performers, who star with Joe Casey and Jannie Jones, said they enjoy watching audiences respond so well to the music.

"Last night I talked to a guy after the show and he said 'I want to leave you with a comment. The music that you hear between ages 14 and 18 sticks with you the rest of your life. You'll never hear anything better or

worse the rest of your life.' It's nice to see people reliving that time of their lives," Robinson said.

The long run also provides both of the performers time to work on writing their own original music.

Aronson, whose musical tastes range from Soundgarden, to AC/DC, the Beatles and other British invasion groups, recently released a six-song EP on Spotify and iTunes of



Rebecca and Richard Hopkins create most of the original cabaret shows at Florida Studio Theatre where she is managing director and he is producing artistic director.

[HERALD-TRIBUNE PHOTO / WENDY DEWHURST CLARK]

acoustic live recordings. "I wrote some of these songs while I was on a cruise ship. The next step is to fully produce them. I'm able to work on the music when we're not performing. I'm excited about it. It's going to span different genres. I'm not trying to sound like any one thing. I actually don't care what it sounds like as long as I find the songs interesting."

Robinson said he grew up rapping, but was also "that kid who would sit on the bus and listen to Mozart really low so no one would hear it." In high school, he discovered musical theater and "I thought Rodgers and Hammerstein was so much cooler than 50 Cent. Stevie Wonder is the god of music, him and Stephen Sondheim and the old jazz writers, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, who crafted words so well."

He has posted a couple of songs on YouTube with Annie Tracy that showcase a mix of styles, but he's more interested in writing songs for others to record.

## "Blue Suede Shoes"

Continues through April 22 in Florida Studio Theatre's Goldstein Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. 941-366-9000; [floridastudiotheatre.org](http://floridastudiotheatre.org)





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Entertainment & Life

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## Theater Review: FST's gripping 'Honor Killing' marks playwright's debut

By **Jay Handelman**

**Arts Editor**

Posted Apr 7, 2018 at 1:42 PM

Updated Apr 7, 2018 at 7:10 PM

### World premiere of Sarah Bierstock's drama runs through May 25

There are several powerful scenes in Sarah Bierstock's play "Honor Killing" when you can almost sense the entire audience holding its collective breath and reacting simultaneously during the play's world premiere at Florida Studio Theatre.

Bierstock, an actress making an impressive debut as a playwright, has crafted a tightly wound drama about New York Times reporter Allisyn Davis investigating an honor killing — the death by stoning of a young woman in Pakistan by members of her family because she did not marry the man they chose for her. It's a tragic story that has a deeper meaning for Allisyn than it may for the audience.

Because of Allisyn's personal and professional experiences, there are issues that complicate her ability to fully cover the story on her own, and she is not someone who likes needing help.

On one level, Allisyn is a trailblazing journalist dedicated to getting to the heart of the story. On another, she has crossed some ethical lines that make it difficult to believe her employers would allow her to continue to cover such tragic stories.

As played by Rachel Moulton, who has become a favorite among FST directors and audiences, Allisyn is a complex, take-no-prisoners reporter who will do anything to get a story. There is much that Bierstock gets right in how Allisyn uses sources she has developed over many years working in dangerous territory. The production, staged by artistic director Richard Hopkins, makes wonderful theatrical use of technology to show how she can cover a story remotely when her access into Pakistan is limited. Rocco DiSanti's video and projection design is a strong element, though the repeated chimes of Skype calls get wearying after a while.

In a fast-moving 80 minutes, the play also touches on the culture clash of how people in each nation view the other, applying our own sense of right and wrong to how others should live. Allisyn has spent a long time reporting from Pakistan but has taken flak for opinion columns she published.

Bierstock's script provides the personal backdrop to explain why writing about this honor killing is so important to Allisyn, reasons that lead Moulton into a performance that is alternately compelling and overwrought. Allisyn is dealing with so many issues about her family history, her romantic life and worries about the safety of sources and colleagues that the actress looks like she's about to collapse from nerves at any moment. One problem builds on another, but they all seem to place the same amount of weight on her shoulders, so there's little variety in the kind of distress she conveys, even as you feel for her situations.

Moulton is nicely paired with Michael Sweeney Hammond as her colleague (and maybe more) Ben Adams, who has learned how to block out the horrors he witnesses to carry on. When bad things happen, he remains placid. His body language or tone don't give away whatever he might be feeling inside.

The production's heart can be found in the performance of J. Paul Nicholas, who plays four distinct roles, most important, the Pakistani activist and reporter's assistant, Abbas, who has become a good friend to Allisyn and cuts through the rhetoric to put a human face on realities of life. In his other roles, Nicholas gets you caught up in his every cautionary word as a Pakistani diplomat, and most chilling of all, as the husband of the murdered young woman with a stunning story to tell.

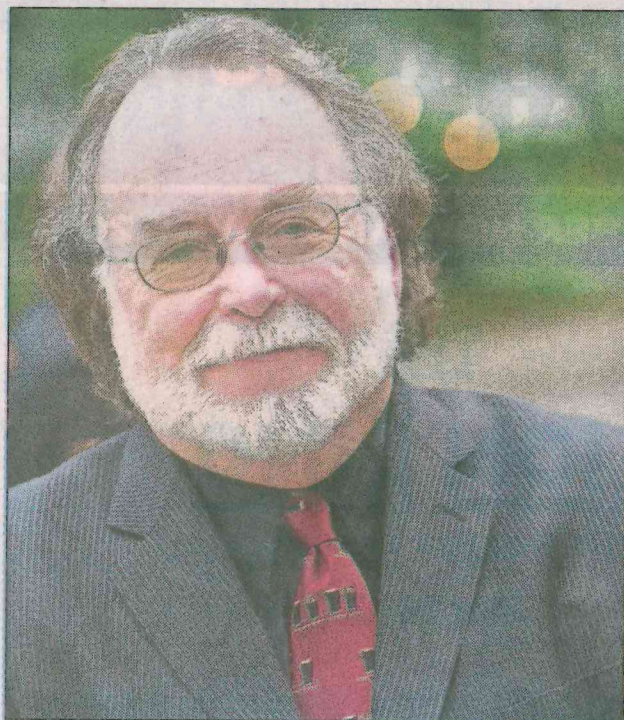
If he provides the heart, Devon Ahmed as the activist Mehreen delivers the intellectual equivalent as she questions Allisyn's motives in applying Western values to covering her stories. Ahmed plays Mehreen as charming and friendly even as she worries that Allisyn sees herself as the white woman riding in to rescue "the poor brown people" of her nation.

Maria Couch gives a heartfelt performance as Allisyn's pregnant sister, and William Langan plays her New York Times editor who has his own questionable ethics.

Scenic designers Isabel and Moriah Curley-Clay create an inventive set that manages to suggest various locations and traditions in Pakistan with modern touches, and Susan Angermann's costumes fit the characters.

Bierstock is sharing a strong story, one based on a true incident, and she tells it in a concise, compelling way. There are elements that need more fleshing out to provide greater focus and clarity, but "Honor Killing" is sure to get audiences involved and talking.





**Playwright Mark St. Germain, whose work has been seen frequently at Florida Studio Theatre, will have a new play presented in the Richard and Betty Burdick New Play Reading Series.** [PHOTO PROVIDED BY FST]

## New plays get readings at FST

**By Jay Handelman**

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Mark St. Germain, who may be the most produced playwright in the history of Florida Studio Theatre, will have a new play tried out during the 36th Richard and Betty Burdick New Play Reading Series.

St. Germain's "Wednesday Child," which will be read on May 13, is one of three new plays that will be featured in the series of staged readings. His plays "Freud's Last Session," "Dancing Lessons," "Relativity,"

"Becoming Dr. Ruth," "The Best of Enemies" and "The Fabulous Lipitones" have been produced at FST in the last few years.

The theater said the new play brings mystery and murder to life in a play that challenges the distinction between right and wrong during an investigation into the murder of a surrogate mother.

The series opens on April 29 with "The Whole Shebang" by Jason Odell Williams, an Emmy-nominated writer, producer and actor and the author of eight plays, including "Church & State." The

new play is about a high school student in Ohio who files suit against her school after a teacher starts lecturing about humans' responsibility about climate change.

The suit triggers a series of local and national events.

The second reading on May 6 is "Big Scary Animals" by Matt Lyle, co-founder and artistic director of the Bootstraps Comedy Theater in Dallas. The play is described as a comedy drama and partially inspired by his own life growing up in East Texas. It's about an older couple who leave

their rural community and unknowingly move into Dallas' gay neighborhood to be close to their granddaughter. It leads to a culture clash on race, sex, guns and sports.

All readings are presented at 3 p.m. in Bowne's Lab, 1247 First St., Sarasota. Playwrights are expected to attend and take part in a post-performance discussion.

The series is free but reservations are required. For reservations or more information, call 941-366-9000 or visit [floridastudiotheatre.org](http://floridastudiotheatre.org).



## Florida Studio Theatre awarded more than 100 playwrights at its Young Playwrights Festival May 19 at Gompertz Theatre.

by: **Niki Kottmann** Managing Editor of Arts and Entertainment

All you need is a pen and paper (or more accurately a computer) to write a play — you can even do it before you're old enough to drive.

For 27 years, Florida Studio Theatre has recognized thousands of young playwrights (K-12th grade) from various countries through its Write a Play program. Throughout this past season, FST received 5,700 submissions for the program, and 100 winners and honorable mentions hailing from the U.S., Scotland, Israel and Russia were picked to be recognized at the May 19 awards ceremony.

Gompertz Theatre was packed with friends, family and teachers of the young playwrights for the ceremony, which also included a special recognition for Publix Super Markets Charities, one of the program's vital supporters.

After watching award-winning plays "Seven Up" and "The Boy Who Liked Pulling Hair," guests listened to speeches by FST's Managing Director Rebecca Hopkins, Associate Director At-Large Kate Alexander and a keynote address by Producing Artistic Director and CEO Richard Hopkins.

One winning playwright was Viviana Serrano, a fourth grader from Garden Elementary who has now won three years in a row. This year she was awarded for her "A 'Beary' Big Adventure," last year for "A Recipe for Friendship" and in 2016 for "Princess Poetry Saves the Day."

Another winning playwright was Joe Hagney, a first grader at Gulf Gate Elementary whose "How to Make a Milkshake" was inspired by his mom's job at an ice cream shop.

He says it only took him an hour to write his masterpiece, which gets laughs with its ironic premise of teaching audiences the wrong way to make a milkshake.

The fedora-wearing writer's advice for those interested in playwriting is simple.

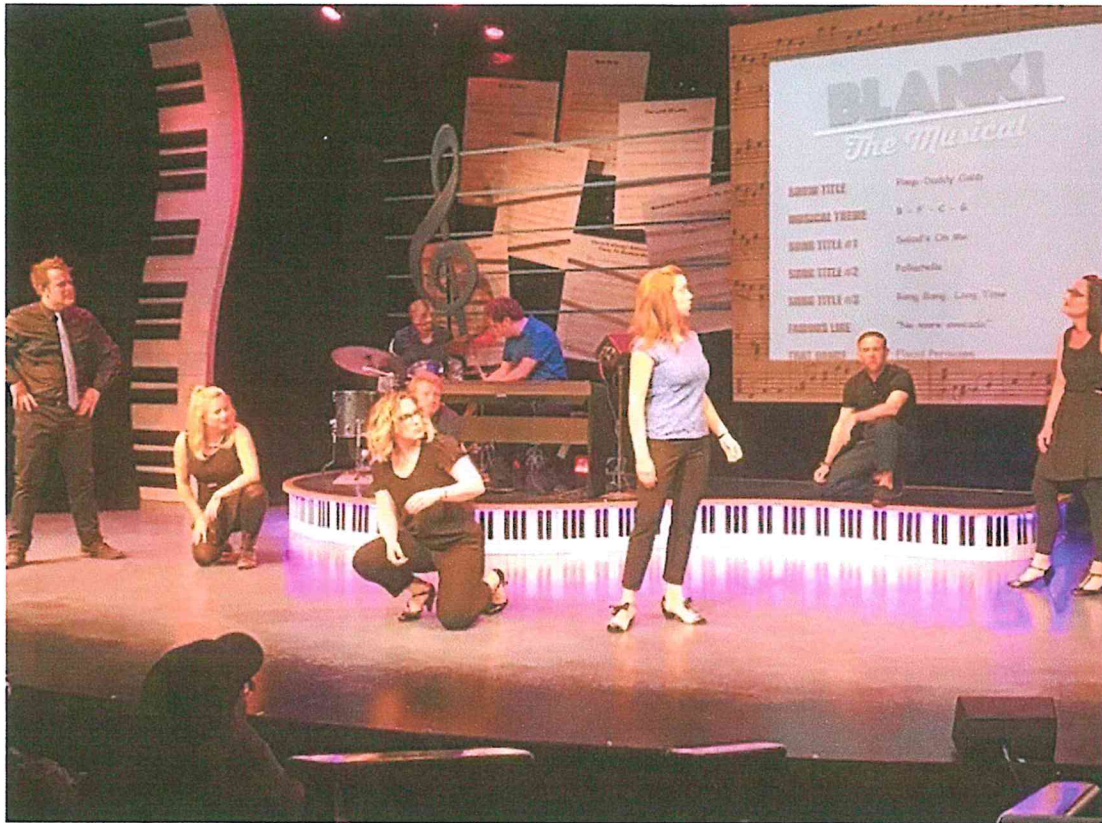
"Be creative," Hagney says.



# Sarasota Improv Festival Ends with a Bang

The ninth annual fest at Florida Studio Theatre provided some welcome comic relief.

By [Kay Kipling](#) 7/17/2017 at 10:07am



Cast members of *Blank! The Musical* perform *Pimp Daddy Cobb*.

IMAGE: [STAFF](#)

With everything going on in the world these days, heaven knows we all need some good laughs. Thanks to Florida Studio Theatre's ninth annual Sarasota Improv Festival, Sarasota audiences just had a weekend of them.

Twenty-two improv groups from all over, with some close to home, entertained in a plethora of performances July 13-15. And while one needs more free time (and stamina) than I had to attend



them all, I'm sure there were plenty of improv aficionados who got their money's worth by seeing every show.

For me, Saturday night was back-to-back improv with three troupes. The first was led by well-known improviser Joe Bill, who teamed with "Friends" including David Christopher, Erin Goldsmith, Ali Reed, Stacey Smith, Mike Carr and FST's own Will Luera, who proudly announced that the group had never played together before launching into a musical created at an audience member's suggestion of the word "canary." That led, naturally enough, perhaps, to a 40-minute show set in a coal mine.



ImprovBoston members at work

IMAGE: [COURTESY FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE](#)



The improvisers became miners swinging picks and then, eventually, such pairs as a former high school quarterback (Bill) and his ex-cheerleader girlfriend; another consisting of evil schemers trying to keep the miners trapped underground; and an inexplicably British duo (Goldsmith and Carr) doing a bit about eating a sausage. Goldsmith also scored when she became a replacement canary, talking in a birdlike voice and using her arms as wings, and another where she became, however improbably, a drill bit used to bore a hole to reach the miners below.

Along the way keyboardist Mike Descoteaux led the group on songs ranging from “Every Scar Tells a Story” to “Hold That Shaft” to “Caught Between You and a Eunuch” (Luera got to play that luckless fellow). Fast and fun.

Descoteaux, who serves as artistic director of ImprovBoston, was up next with that ensemble, consisting of Sara Burns, Deana Criess, Matthew Fear and again, Luera. Here the approach was to debate about something you normally wouldn’t debate about—in this case, at audience suggestion, types of hats. Various hat stories surfaced, including one about a graduation mortarboard; another involving a very negative version of marriage therapy; a drunken cowboy; and an Uber driver whose transport is his horse. Also tied in here: a nod to regional Tonys and community theater that kept Criess’ voice soaring ever higher and higher on a really big number.

Finally, the festival’s headliner took the stage at the Gompertz Theatre. *Blank! The Musical* has played off-Broadway, and, although each performance is both opening and, sadly, closing night for a new musical, the one staged here is something you’d probably be happy to pay to see in New York.

Again, audience suggestions start things off, leading to a musical improbably called *Pimp Daddy Cobb*, with song titles shouted out, such as “Salad’s on Me,” “Polkatella,” and “Bang Bang Long Time.” Musical notes for the show’s theme (B, F, C, G), a dramatic line of dialogue (“No more avocado!”), a dance number (the Flaccid Periscope) and a musical style (jazz) are all thrown at the company, too. And they respond with a 70-minute show about a drought causing potato famine in Idaho, a moblike business guy named Danny Pokatelli, a couple working their way from best friends to true love, and a cow named Bessie.



It's often hysterically funny, but what's amazing about it is that, as again led by Mike Descoteaux (with Hunter Brown on drums), the music here often sounds like it could really be from a Broadway musical, whether it's the anthemic "Look Ahead," the blazing "Salad's on Me" or the upbeat "No Phones, No Fun." And the songs work to provide some of the same emotions that you expect from a Broadway show, too, amply aided by energetic and clever choreography (how much of that is planned ahead and how much on the fly is anyone's guess) and some really strong musical theater voices.

This year's fest may be over, but ImprovBoston is hanging around for two shows this coming weekend, July 21 and 22. And of course FST Improv performs every Saturday night at the Bowne Theatre on the FST campus. For more info about both, call 366-9000 or visit [floridastudiotheatre.org](http://floridastudiotheatre.org).



# Jason Cannon brings children's tale to life at FST

**MARTY FUGATE**  
CONTRIBUTOR

Director Jason Cannon doesn't shrink from voyages to strange and dangerous places. He's taken Florida Studio Theatre audiences to the heart of darkness ("How to Use a Knife"); the scene of a classroom tragedy ("Gidion's Knot"); and the enigmatic equations of Einstein's mind ("Relativity.")

Cannon's odysseys for younger audiences sail to realms of pure imagination — whimsical and wonderful realms with dangers of their own. Cannon's latest expedition takes you through the portal of a prosaic wardrobe to the fantastic land of Narnia.

The FST Children's Theatre production is a stage adaptation of C.S. Lewis' beloved "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." As Lewis fans know, Narnia is a magical place, but hardly safe. Great children's literature is never childish; the war between good and evil wages behind the wardrobe's door as well.

We recently spoke with Cannon about the journey audiences will experience when they join the children on Lewis' timeless odyssey.

**Did you read "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" as a kid, or are you just encountering the material now?**

"Lion" was definitely part of my childhood experience. I read the book several times growing up, and the entire "Chronicles of Narnia" series a couple times. I

## IF YOU GO

### 'THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE'

**When:** 11 a.m. every Saturday through March 31  
**Additional Friday performance:** March 30  
**Where:** FST Bowne's Lab Theatre, 1265 First St.  
**Tickets:** \$20  
**Info:** Call 366-9000.

dove deep into C.S. Lewis in high school for a big project on "The Screwtape Letters," and again in 2004, when I wrote a play about the friendship between Lewis and Tolkien. I also got to see my Aunt Vonda portray the White Witch in a funny adaptation.

**Was C.S. Lewis your favorite fantasy writer growing up?** I'd have to give that honor to J.R.R. Tolkien. As a kid and teenager, I actually preferred "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" series to the "Narnia" series, but when I was asked to direct this play, I was definitely excited.

**What's your directorial approach to this adaptation?** Stay out of the way of the magic, and trust the power of the audience's imagination. The script is incredibly well constructed, so I focus primarily on empowering the actors to make the biggest and most magical choices they



Courtesy photo

Jason Cannon loved "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" as a kid.

can as they leap between characters.

### Who's acting in the FST production?

Two of our awesome acting apprentices. They portray all the essential characters to tell the story.

### What's it been like working with these talented young actors?

As a director, it's been a vastly different experience for me. I'd previously just directed "Once," and "How to Use a Knife" — all of which are main stage shows for grown-ups.

### And all obviously deal with mature subject matter.

True. But there's another key difference besides content.

"Lion" takes full advantage of the theater's power to bend space and time in a creative way. When you strip a story down to what's essential, that's when the magic truly happens. And that magic is common for children — they haven't yet been taught to self-censor or need to justify their imagination. In live theater, the audience's imagination is the most powerful tool of all.

For me as a theater artist, it has been a wonderful reminder to trust the audience and tap into their imagination at every opportunity. I actually think Lewis has woven that lesson

throughout his Narnia novels. Aside from that deep magic, it's also just super fun to have the actors do all sorts of silly walks and voices. Playing so many different characters (including many nonhuman characters.) really stretches their physical and vocal boundaries. The young actors really had to find the essential truth of "faun" and "witch" and "bird" and "lion."

### What insight should kids (and adults) take away from the performance?

That hope, love, and bravery can overcome cruelty and selfishness. That imagination is far more powerful than any mega-million dollar budget. That stories can teach us truths at a bone-deep level. And that sharing live experiences is precious.

### The story is so familiar — both to readers and fans of the Narnia film series. How did you find a fresh take on the material?

The script itself is a fresh take. Lewis was well versed in origin stories and myths from around the world. The familiarity of the story, which is actually just a result of the universality and timelessness of these themes and characters, stems from Lewis's ability to find the commonality amongst all the different manifestations of resurrection stories, "witches," fauns, heroes, "time travel," transformation, etc. We actually see similar archetypes in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series.





Photos by Niki Kottmann

Arnold Simonsen and Ronda Montminy with Florida Studio Theatre Managing Director Rebecca Hopkins and Artistic Director and CEO Richard Hopkins

## FST celebrates new theater wing

**F**lorida Studio Theatre is growing, and it has reached a milestone.

Several FST board members, employees and donors attended a reception Oct. 4 to dedicate the Arnold Simonsen and Ronda Montminy Theatre Wing. Montminy and Simonsen donated \$1 million to acquire the theater's latest property at 1234 First St. The building will house production space as well as administrative offices.

"Today our shoulders got a little bit stronger and a little bit broader," said Artistic Director and CEO Richard Hopkins.

— NIKI KOTTMANN



Carol Gilbert, Samus Haddab and Bruce Price





# Florida Studio Theatre Celebrates Opening of Kretzmer Artist Residence

by BWW News Desk Dec. 18, 2017

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On December 4, 2017 Florida **Studio Theatre** held the official dedication for the opening of the Kretzmer Artist Housing Project located on Cohen Way in the growing Rosemary District. These five new townhomes help to fill the pressing need for quality housing that is safe, accessible, and within close proximity to downtown.

Project supporters, FST artists, Board members, and FST staff all gathered to celebrate the completion of this new artistic home. "This is where it all begins," said Producing Artistic

Director, Richard Hopkins. "This is where the artist lives. The Kretzmer Artist Residence is the cornerstone of an artistic community; A community that will inspire collaboration among the many different artists, interns, and apprentices who work diligently and tirelessly to inspire, challenge, and entertain on FST's five stages."

Ernie Kretzmer, in loving memory of Alisa Kretzmer contributed the lead gift to this new artist housing. Along with a matching challenge made by Ed and Susan Maier, additional contributions to see the completed project were given by individual donors as well as the State of Florida (sponsored in part by the Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Council on Arts and Culture and the State of Florida), the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, and the Bank of America Client Foundation, Richardson Foundation Fund, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee.

After breaking ground on the project back in October of 2016, the structure was completed just one year later in November of 2017. "One purpose in building this building is to raise the value of art in our society," said Hopkins. "The best way to raise the value of art is to raise the value of our artist. One way we show that we value our artists is by providing them with an excellent artistic home. It's a place to think. It's a place to imagine the unimaginable. It's a place to dream what no one has dreamed."

FST Board President, Dennis McGillicuddy also adds, "We at FST have never placed buildings and other infrastructure needs ahead of our artistic mission; Just the opposite, as we have consistently made certain that our artistic requirements are what drives our capital spending. Having high quality actor housing that this project represents is another example of that principle as it is crucial to maintaining the quality of our work."

Along with Florida **Studio Theatre**'s tremendous growth in programming over the last 5 years, comes the growth of the artistic company and staff. FST currently houses over 100 guest artists and interns a year. These new townhomes include 20 bedrooms for visiting artists and young theatre professionals participating in the educational internship program.



According to Hopkins, "The Kretzmer Residence will take us well into the 21st Century.

For that, we have Ernie and Alisa Kretzmer to thank. The future has gotten a little bit brighter today because of the lead gift of Ernie and Alisa Kretzmer, the Matching challenge of Ed and Susan Maier, and the support of the FST Family. Thank you all."

#### About Florida **Studio Theatre**

Known as Sarasota's Contemporary Theatre, Florida **Studio Theatre** was founded in 1973 by Jon Spelman. Starting out as a small touring company, FST traveled to places such as migrant camps and prisons. The company then acquired the former Woman's Club building, becoming the first permanent venue. Shortly after Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins arrived, the building was purchased and renamed The Keating Theatre. In the years that followed, Florida **Studio Theatre** established itself as a major force in American Theatre, presenting contemporary theatre in its five theatre venues: the Keating Theatre, the Gompertz Theatre, the Parisian style Goldstein Cabaret and John C. Court Cabaret, and Bowne's Lab Theatre.

Even with its growth, Florida **Studio Theatre** remains firmly committed to making the arts accessible and affordable to a broad-based audience. FST develops theatre that speaks to our living, evolving, and dynamically changing world. As FST grows and expands, it continues to provide audiences with challenging, contemporary drama and innovative programs.





*"Opioid Crisis: Is your family at risk?" symposium of Humanity Working to End Genocide held Feb. 25 at St. Martha Catholic School in Sarasota.*

## Opioid crisis takes center stage at symposium

BY BOB REDDY OF THE FLORIDA CATHOLIC STAFF | MARCH 13, 2018

**Sarasota** | The Centers for Disease Control recently reported that overdoses kill five people every hour across the United States, or 5,400 per year in Florida. In addition, the percentage of opioid-related emergency room visits jumped 30 percent in one year.

This is a national and local issue which is why the Diocese of Venice, along with the Sarasota Ministerial Association, the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee, and the Florida Studio Theatre, hosted a symposium with Humanity Working to End Genocide titled "Opioid Crisis: Is your family at risk?" on Feb. 25 at the Zazarino Center of St. Martha Catholic School in Sarasota. The event included personal testimonies and a panel discussion.

The most poignant talk was from Lisa Brandy who shared the heartbreaking story of how her daughter, Brandi, died in 2011 at the age of 18 due to prescription drug poisoning. The story was even more powerful as Lisa Brandy shared samples from Brandi's journal as she struggled with addiction, stayed sober for long periods, but sadly relapsed before taking opiates one more time.

"That night her decision to use a prescription opiate resulted in tragedy and we lost the daughter we loved so much, and alongside whom we fought so diligently, to accidental drug poisoning," Lisa Brandy said. "She didn't expect to die. She didn't believe she would die. Nobody who dies this way ever thinks they won't wake up again."

Her advice is to increase resources at all levels to provide support for those who are facing addiction and for the families who also struggle. "Addiction is not a choice. It is a disease. Please



don't judge them. There is not one young person who wants to be an addict. Not one, I can guarantee you. This is a man-made epidemic. Opioids were created for end-of-life transition — a terminally ill cancer patient for example — not for your wisdom tooth, not for menstrual cramps and not for a sprained ankle.”

Bishop Frank J. Dewane delivered the invocation and expressed his prayers that everyone work together to find a solution to this crisis which rips apart families each day.

The symposium grew out of the Opioid Crisis Clergy Conference in September 2017, which included religious leaders from all faiths. It was decided then that due to the serious and deadly nature of the local and national opioid crisis, important information needed to reach their respective congregations.

A panel discussion addressed the harsh reality of the problems facing the community where addiction to opioids is overwhelming first responders, emergency rooms and treatment facilities and families. On the panel were: Dr. Russell S. Vega, chief medical examiner of District 12 which includes Sarasota and Manatee counties; Pastor Lynette McClelland of the Sarasota Ministerial Association; P.J. Brooks, Vice President of First Step; and Dr. Eddy Regnier, a member of the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology and the Florida Psychological Association.

It was generally agreed that there needs to be a greater awareness about the opioid crisis. The panel recommended better integration of addiction treatment into the health care system. For example, emergency room staff need better training to make sure addicts get follow-up addiction treatment. Too often, addicts are simply revived and sent home without follow-up care, only to overdose again. Intervention is needed in the face of this opioid crisis.