

# OUT HERE



CONCEPT BY LESLIE BUXBAUM, DAVID J. LEVIN,  
AND ERIN MCKEOWN

BOOK AND LYRICS BY LESLIE BUXBAUM

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY ERIN MCKEOWN

DRAMATURGY BY DAVID J. LEVIN

DIRECTED BY CHAY YEW

APRIL 10 - MAY 10, 2026

**COURT** THEATRE



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
CHICAGO

# WELCOME



Dear Friends,

Welcome to *Out Here*, the final production of the 2025/26 season, a bold and courageous new musical, and a dynamic collaboration between Court Theatre and the University of Chicago.

The great gift of being a professional theatre on the University's campus is that we can take creative risks and develop work in a proverbial "third space"—alongside Court's inventive reimaginings of the classics, alongside academia, in the liminal spaces between creative and intellectual pursuits, ripe with curiosity and potential.

*Out Here* is a product of this fruitful third space collaboration, a project six years in the making that asks crucial questions about family, joy, and the choices we make, and does so with an unbridled sense of play. You are joining us at a critical time in this work's development and are among its very first audiences, so, to borrow a line from the show, "Welcome to our house."

*Out Here* is also part of a much longer legacy of Court-developed original work, spanning from our rich past (as evidenced by *Berlin*, *Native Son*, and others) into our illustrious future. As a new work, *Out Here* challenges and queers the tropes of the traditional American musical (one that includes last season's *Falsettos*)—with a rock n' roll twist. And an exploded house. And divorce. And bliss. So, while the story and many of its overarching themes are classic, the lens used to explore them is unique. Voices typically excluded from canonical works about American families are elevated. We have the chance to sing a new song.

We would like to thank the University of Chicago and the many members of the University community (including students!) who lent their ingenuity, expertise, and enthusiasm to this project. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, the Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, the Committee on Theater and Performance Studies, the Logan Center for the Arts, and Lucky Plush Productions. We would also like to thank those partnering with us to produce our complementary public programs, animating this story in personal and hyper-local ways and bridging what's on our stage and outside our doors.

And we'd like to thank you. Your support is a testament to creative evolution and an affirmation of intergenerational queer storytelling.

We can't wait to go on this journey alongside you. We'll see you *Out Here*.

With gratitude,

Avery Willis Hoffman  
*Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director*

Angel Ysaguirre  
*Executive Director*

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 Executive Director

APR 10 - MAY 10, 2026

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BOOK AND LYRICS BY LESLIE BUXBAUM

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DRAMATURGY BY DAVID J. LEVIN

DIRECTED BY CHAY YEW

ORCHESTRATIONS BY ERIN MCKEOWN

WITH CHRISTIE CHILES TWILLIE

MUSIC SUPERVISION BY CHRISTIE CHILES TWILLIE

MOVEMENT DIRECTION BY BREON ARZELL

Andrew Boyce USA, Co-Scenic Designer

Lauren M. Nichols USA, Co-Scenic Designer

Christine Pascual USA, Costume Designer

Lee Fiskness USA, Lighting Designer

Mikhail Fiksel USA, Sound Designer

Sheryl Williams, Intimacy Choreographer

Sammi Grant, Vocal and Dialect Consultant

Becca McCracken C.S.A., Casting Director

Katrina Herrmann\*, Production Stage Manager

Jaclynn Joslin\*, Assistant Stage Manager

Setting: Here and now.

Please note: Production uses water-based haze;  
 actors will be using the aisles.

*Supported by*

**Charles Newell Production Fund**

**Gustavo Bamberger and Martha Van Haitsma**



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*Developed in partnership with*



*Developed with support from a Mellon Fellowship for Arts Practice and Scholarship at the Richard & Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, University of Chicago; Lucky Plush Productions; Center for the Study of Gender & Sexuality, University of Chicago; Committee on Theater and Performance Studies, University of Chicago; and Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago.*

The scenic, costume, lighting and sound designers in LORT Theatres are represented by United Scenic Artists, Local USA-829 of the IATSE.

\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

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Court Theatre operates under an agreement between the League of Resident Theatres and Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States

This project is partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events. Court Theatre acknowledges support from the Illinois Arts Council.



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# BIG BRAINS PODCAST

THE MINDS  
BEHIND THE  
BREAKTHROUGHS



# CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Brian .....	Cliff Chamberlain*
Dawn .....	Becca Ayers*
Cleo .....	Ellie Duffey*
Robin .....	Bethany Thomas*
Martin.....	Alex Goodrich*
Gina .....	Amanda Pulcini*†
Jett.....	Z Mowry*

## **Musicians:**

Keyboard, Conductor .....	Christie Chiles Twillie
Violin.....	Daniela Bisenius
Cello .....	Rachel Schuldt
Guitar.....	Percy Nesbary III
Percussion .....	Maddi Vogel

## **Understudies:**

Lexi Alioto (u/s Dawn)  
Danielle Davis\* (u/s Robin/Gina)  
Michael McCracken (u/s Brian/Martin)  
Avery Moss (u/s Cleo/Jett)

\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

†Dance Captain

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*Beignet Done That!*

ROUX



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# SONG LIST

“Opening”	Brian, Cleo, Dawn, Jett, Martin, Robin
“In the Closet”	Dawn
“Tinder & Spark”	Dawn, Robin
“Mediation”	Martin, Brian, Dawn, Cleo
“Time Out In the Closet”	Dawn
“Too Soon”	Brian
“Courting”	Dawn, Robin
“OK OK OK”	Martin, Dawn, Cleo
“This Might Not Work”	Dawn, Robin
“Family Fugue”	Dawn
“You’re Not Writing Me”	Full Company
“Return to the Closet”	Dawn
“Robin’s Question”	Robin, Dawn
“Double Down on the Closet”	Dawn
“2.0pening”	Dawn, Cleo, Brian, Gina
“Closet Check-In”	Dawn
“Jett Comes In”	Cleo, Brian, Gina, Jett
“Mediation 2.0”	Cleo, Brian, Dawn, Gina, Martin, Jett
“2.0K OK OK”	Gina, Martin, Jett
“Picture Perfect”	Cleo
“Family Fugue 2.0”	Brian, Dawn, Jett, Martin
“Not 2.0 Soon”	Brian, Martin
“You’re Not Re-Writing Me”	Gina, Cleo, Jett, Martin
“Dawn’s Question”	Dawn
“With You”	Full Company
“Finale”	Full Company

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# PRODUCTION TEAM

Music Preparation.....	John Blane and Tim Hanson of Emily Grishman Music Preparation
Music Assistant.....	Sebastian Altomare
Associate Casting Director .....	Celeste M. Cooper
Literary Fellow .....	Marissa Fenley
Company Culture Manager .....	Sheryl Williams
Production Assistants .....	Lawrence Jacquan, Katie Mae Ryan
Scenic Artists .....	Sarah Lewis USA, Rachel Meierotto USA
Carpenters.....	Sean Moore, Tseela Sokolin-Maimon
Assistant Prop Manager .....	Persephone Lawrence
Assistant Costume Designer .....	Ophena De La Rosa
Costume Shop Project Manager .....	Eric Guy
Costume Shop Assistant .....	Jess Donaldson
Stitcher .....	Ari Casas
Hair Consultant.....	Megan Pirtle
Hair Design for Robin .....	Becky Wilson
Wardrobe Technician/Deck Crew .....	Sebastian Van Hix
Assistant Lighting Supervisor .....	Bobbie Buie
Electricians .....	Ann Huerta, Bobbie Buie, Kate Nagorski, Ish Petersen, Garvin Van Der Noot
Assistant Sound Designer .....	Stefanie Senior
A1, Mainstage Programmer.....	Ian C. Weber
A2 .....	Christine Burquest



Scenic Artists identified by USA are members of United Scenic Artists, I.A.T.S.E. Local USA829, AFL-CIO, CLC.

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	<i>Executive Director</i>	Angel Ysaguirre
	<i>Associate Artistic Director</i>	Gabrielle Randle-Bent
	<i>Managing Director</i>	Heidi Thompson Saunders
	<i>Resident Artist</i>	Ron OJ Parson
<i>Director of the Civic Actor Studio</i>		Joanie Friedman
	<i>Director of Casting and Artist Cultivation</i>	Becca McCracken CSA
	<i>Executive Assistant</i>	Tyler Calhoun
<i>Casting and Archival Intern</i>		Jo Selmeczy
	<i>Director of Engagement</i>	Kamilah Rashied
	<i>Director of Education</i>	Jarrett King
<i>Engagement Programs Manager</i>		Kelcie Beene
	<i>Education Programs Manager</i>	Kate Wiseman
	<i>Education Coordinator</i>	Sonia Goldberg
	<i>Teaching Artists</i>	Kirsten Baity India Nicole Burton Monet Felton Willow James Jamaque Newberry
	<i>Director of Production</i>	Kaitlyn Anderson
<i>Associate Production Manager and Company Manager</i>		Lorenzo Blackett
	<i>Technical Director</i>	Luke Lemanski
<i>Assistant Technical Director</i>		Kelly Lesniak
	<i>Scene Shop Foreperson</i>	Cordell Brown
	<i>House Carpenter</i>	Tony Cooper
	<i>Head of Props</i>	Lara Musard
<i>Costume Shop Manager</i>		Liz Taylor
	<i>Wardrobe Supervisor</i>	Jody Schmidt
	<i>Lighting Supervisor</i>	Andrei Borges
<i>Technical Director of Sound and Video</i>		Josh McCammon
	<i>Director of Development</i>	Leah Cox
	<i>Associate Director of Development</i>	Madison Blackwood
<i>Senior Assistant Director of Development</i>		Jean Osberger
	<i>Assistant Director of Development</i>	Cara Peterson
	<i>Director of Marketing</i>	Traci Brant
<i>Associate Director of Marketing for Content Creation</i>		Camille Oswald
<i>Associate Director of Marketing for Audience Services</i>		Matthew P. Sitz
	<i>Audience Development</i>	Phillip H. Lewis
<i>Associate and House Manager</i>		Heather Dumdei
	<i>Box Office and Ticketing Software Manager</i>	Abbey Freestone
<i>Associate Box Office Manager</i>		Jordan Brown
<i>Assistant Box Office Managers</i>		Camryn D'Angelo
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	<i>Marketing Intern</i>	Clara Bennett
	<i>Public Relations</i>	Cathy Taylor Public Relations
	<i>Captions</i>	CaptionPoint
	<i>Audio Description</i>	Martin Wilde
<i>Director of Artistic Sign Language</i>		Hershella Ashford
	<i>ASL Interpreters</i>	Jack Crowley Julikka LaChe Havalah Teaman
	<i>ASL Coordination</i>	Mosaico Interpreting Company
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<i>Volunteer Coordinator</i>		Rick Babcock
	UChicago Arts Administration	
<i>Senior Advisor to the Provost for the Arts and Deputy Dean in Arts &amp; Humanities</i>		Catriona MacLeod
	<i>Executive Director</i>	Jessica Musselwhite
	<i>Director of Finance</i>	Jen Katz
	<i>Financial and Grant Administrator</i>	Germaine Kindred
<i>Senior Human Resources Business Partner</i>		Ellen Peterson
<i>Human Resources Manager</i>		Cara Parrish
	<i>Associate Director of Development</i>	Tom Popelka
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# IN CONVERSATION

BECCA AYERS, ELLIE DUFFEY,  
AND CLIFF CHAMBERLAIN

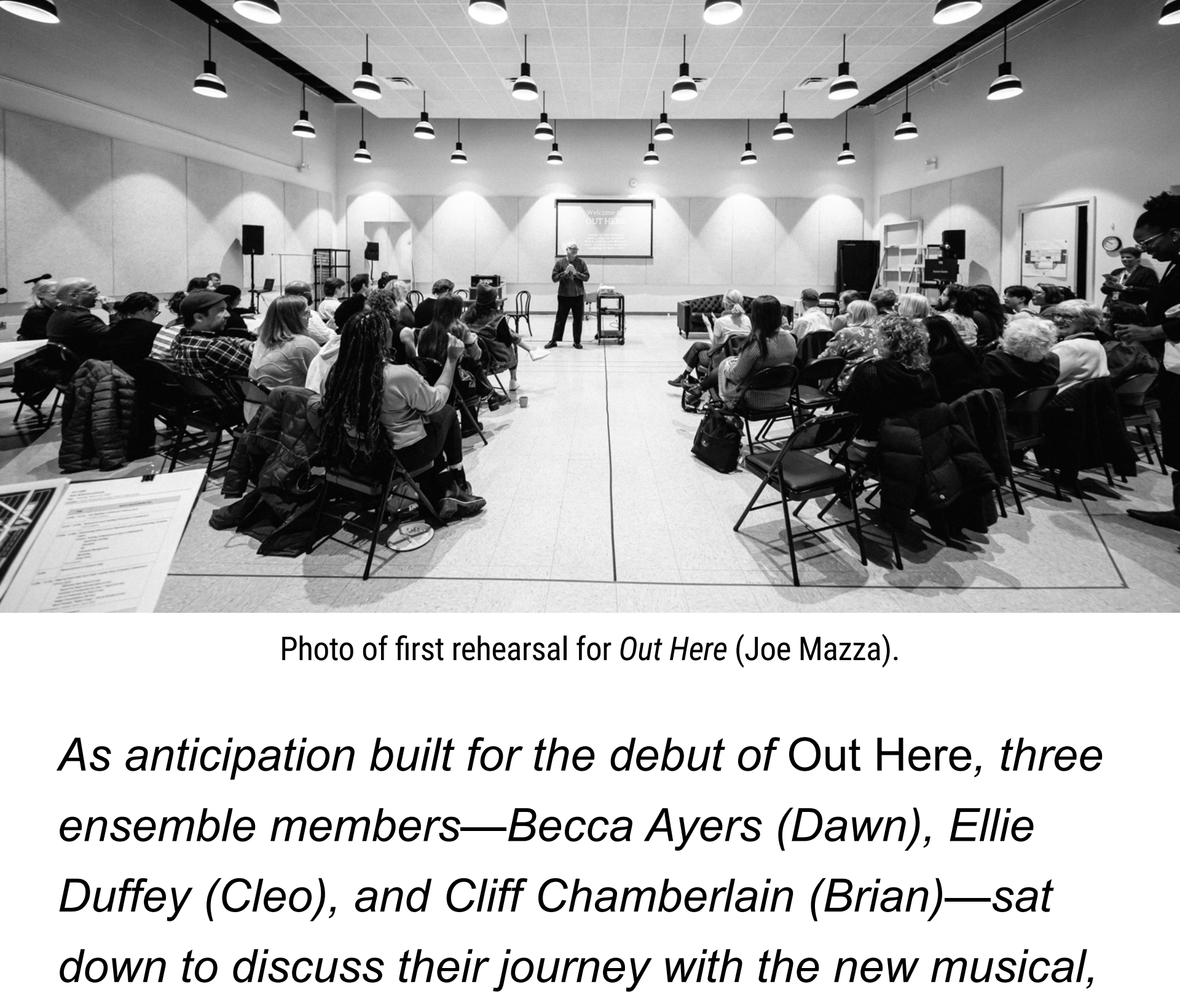


Photo of first rehearsal for *Out Here* (Joe Mazza).

As anticipation built for the debut of *Out Here*, three ensemble members—Becca Ayers (*Dawn*), Ellie Duffey (*Cleo*), and Cliff Chamberlain (*Brian*)—sat down to discuss their journey with the new musical. Below is an excerpt of their conversation.

**How long have you been attached to *Out Here*?**

**Becca:** I've been attached to the project since summer 2025. I was doing summer stock in New Hampshire when I put myself on tape, and my audition was a very wordy song. (Don't tell, but I used a teleprompter!)

**Ellie:** I've also been tied to the project since the beginning of last summer. It was a crazy time: I was in finals, I was graduating college, I was moving apartments, and I was doing *Berlin* at Court while the audition process was going on.

**Cliff:** I have been officially attached since last summer. I did a workshop of *Out Here* about three years ago, in the summer of 2023 at the University of Chicago. I actually don't know what stage of the process it was in—pretty early on, I think.

**Have you been involved in developing a new musical before?**

**Cliff:** I haven't been in any process of any musical ever, so from the get-go to now, I am absolutely in uncharted territory.

**Ellie:** Same here. I really don't do a lot of musicals—or it's not something I see myself doing often. I participated in some early workshops for student-written pieces in college, but nothing like this.

**Becca:** Yeah, I've done a bunch. There's a children's theater company called TheaterWorks USA, and they always have really amazing writers. I've been involved in a lot of their developmental workshops, including one that Kristin Anderson-Lopez wrote, who went on to do *Frozen*. Another was called *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, by Larry O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin, who went on to do *Legally Blonde* (both O'Keefe and Benjamin), *Heathers* (O'Keefe), and *Mean Girls* (Benjamin). Then I did *Dogfight* and *Giant* off-Broadway. I've done a lot of readings and workshops, too.

**Ellie, you appeared in a new work last season at Court—*Berlin*. Did your experience with *Berlin* influence your preparation for *Out Here*?**

**Ellie:** *Berlin* was different because there was an established world already—600 pages of backstory in Jason Lutes's graphic novel. Originating a role happened there, but not in the same way. With *Out Here*, we're building from the ground up. Everyone comes in with different levels of excitement and confusion, and that's super exciting.

**How do you approach learning music for a new musical?**

**Cliff:** My 14-year-old daughter is teaching me how to read music. I can't read music, so I learn by ear. The creative team is incredibly supportive and patient, offering tracks for us to follow. Everyone's guidance and artistry makes it easier for those of us who don't usually do musicals to succeed.

**Ellie:** I honestly don't read music either; I learn by ear. For me, as long as I hear it enough times, I can get there.

**Becca:** That's how I learn too—by repetition.

**What was it like to learn original music and adjust to rewrites?**

**Becca:** I don't mind it. I like not having anyone else to compare myself to since I'm the first one performing the role in a full-fledged production. For me, it's repetition—listening to the songs as much as I listened to *Into the Woods* when I was 15.

**Ellie:** Original music is exciting—auditioning with a new song, seeing the creators excited as their work comes to life. Being in a new show is thrilling, especially as the script keeps changing. It feels like a team effort. There's a lot of adrenaline in the room.

**Cliff, any lessons learned from the different phases of development?**

**Cliff:** The biggest lesson is just how talented the artists at all stages of development have been. It's inspiring to see songs change, move, get edited or even replaced—all to support the story. The musical really focuses on Dawn's journey—about family and divorce, but ultimately her story. Different actors and artists have contributed, and the creative team has grown the story from every iteration. It's like breaking in a pair of boots—each time, they fit a bit better.

**Becca and Ellie, what drew you to your roles?**

**Becca:** When I read the script, I had never felt more seen. It was so relatable, right in my wheelhouse. I went to a women's college, I identify as pansexual now, and the character is a conglomeration of my friends. I was excited and started sharing things with the creative team—pictures from college, old memories. The story really resonated.

**Ellie:** A lot of the show is about Dawn, but I connected to Cleo's generational perspective. Her mother is coming out to her, but for Cleo, her mom's identity isn't complicated—she simply supports Dawn. The challenge is understanding the deconstruction of family and how family changes. I'm excited to help tell Dawn's story.

**The show's depiction of family is expansive—how does that resonate with you?**

**Ellie:** I was lucky to have a lot of supportive adult women in my life in addition to my mother. The show explores that idea that family isn't just the nuclear unit—more people in your village means more support.

**Becca:** My 'chosen family' that I met in college are still a huge part of my life. Their kids call me Aunt Becca and I am their godmother. I'm nonbinary. When I was growing up, I didn't know what non-binary was.

**Is this musical a coming of age story?**

**Ellie:** Yes, but not necessarily in the way you'd think. You get to watch your mom come of age. There's generational downloading throughout the piece; everyone goes through growing pains, but it manifests differently for each character.

**Cliff:** I am a child of divorce, and I'm a husband and a father now. What I really love about this musical is that Brian's challenge isn't about accepting Dawn's authentic self. He's actually supportive of that part of her. What's hard is losing his wife and the change in the family unit.

There's a lot of love in this musical—you can feel it in the bones of the show and in the characters. There's miscommunication and hurt, and times when frustrations boil over, but it's all steeped in a sense of love, acceptance, and a challenge to be our best selves. There might be moments when the characters are mean, but there's no cruelty.

Eliminating cruelty is something my wife and I are adamant about, both in the world and in raising our kids to be compassionate human beings. Thank goodness my kids are all big-hearted, lovely people. We're trying to create human beings who have compassion for their fellow people, and I think the musical has that all over the place. Sorry, I get emotional talking about my kids and this kind of thing.

**Becca:** When I hit 40, it felt like suddenly my only audition opportunities were for witches or invisible moms. I started writing so I could be represented and create opportunities for marginalized people. I am beyond grateful that the character of Dawn is so seen, so complex, and is exploring new territory yet to be experienced by a musical theater audience.

**Ellie:** I've been thinking about the shift that happens in your teenage years, when you start to see your parents as three-dimensional people who are flawed. I think that moment happens a lot for Cleo, and instead of shying away from it, she approaches it with compassion and curiosity. I think that's true for all the characters in this play—they run forward with compassion.

**How does it feel to originate a role?**

**Becca:** It's so exciting to be in the room with the creators and to get information that helps illuminate the character first-hand. We get to create as a team, which is a gift I'm extremely grateful for.

**Ellie:** It feels more personal—you get to bring different aspects of yourself into the character, and by the end, a full-fledged person emerges.

**Cliff:** Most of the work I've done in Chicago has been new. I've been super lucky to be a part of many new projects. It's always really rewarding to be in the room with the creators—to watch them, to be part of something happening for the first time. It's rewarding to put my spirit into a project, knowing it'll be there forever.

**Why should audiences come see *Out Here*?**

**Becca:** Everyone will find something to relate to in it. It's about family, communication, compromise, getting through hard times and it's very real.

**Cliff:** It's the musical we need in 2026. The story, characters, and journey have heart. It's a piece of art that belongs to this time, encouraging people to go out into the world and be better.

**Ellie:** This new sort of musical storytelling is exciting. It's people running toward each other with compassion. We meet each other with different experience levels and run toward each other with compassion as artists.

**Cliff:** The book is great. The music is rockin', and all the performances will be, too.

**Ellie & Becca:** Yeah.

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# AN ABRIDGED OUT HERE DICTIONARY

BY DAVID J. LEVIN, DRAMATURG AND ALICE H. AND STANLEY G. HARRIS JR. DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR OF GERMANIC STUDIES, CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES, THEATER AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES, AND THE COLLEGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



Co-creators Erin McKeown, David J. Levin, and Leslie Buxbaum speak at first rehearsal for *Out Here* (Photo by Joe Mazza).

In this brief essay, I want to introduce two terms—*undo-sical* and *tripod*—that emerged over the course of our work on *Out Here*, terms that I hope will help to explain how the piece works and how we worked on it.

When Leslie Buxbaum, Erin McKeown, and I first started collaborating on this project back in 2022, we referred to it not as a musical, but as an *undo-sical*. Our thought was that musicals are generally characterized by a conventional alternation between speaking and singing. In *Out Here*, we wanted to explore that alternation, play with it, de-conventionalize it, even undo it. At the same time, *Out Here* tells the story of an undoing and redoing of a family and a set of relationships. We wanted to bring these two components—our formal interest in undoing and redoing the relationship of speaking and singing; and our dramatic interest in telling a story of undoing and redoing relationships—into dialogue with each other. Characters in the world of *Out Here* wonder about their relationships to each other, and they wonder about how they might best express those relationships—and they do that wondering in spoken words, and in song; and at times they even do it about spoken words and song. Which is to say, they wonder whether what they’re saying might be better said—whether it might be more expressive, more convincing, more successful—if it were sung, and vice-versa.

There are a slew of other noteworthy components of formal play in the piece that follow from this fundamental commitment to playing with the distinction between singing and speaking. One of them comes from a core tenet of Leslie’s many years of work in the theater: the idea that we are all right here, in the theater, right now. In *Out Here*, this core tenet allows us to play with the multiple meanings of “house.” Since a house is a home (like the house that we see on stage), and in theater parlance, it’s also the theater (so that, the “front of house,” for example, is the auditorium and the foyer). By this logic, the actors that we encounter on stage in *Out Here* are in a house; but by extension, so too are we, in the audience, in Court Theatre’s house. Likewise, in the piece, we play with competing expectations of theatrical reality and the reality of everyday life. And we’re keen to explore the distinction between the stage as a theatrical world unto itself, and its physical status as a space shared with the audience, and thus, as an extension of the real world. There are some additional corollaries of this interest in play—involving time, for example, or the piece’s linear progression. They all derive from our core commitment to exploring the relationships at the heart of this piece right here, in the theater, with these performers, and with you in this audience, right now. For everyone in the world of this piece, undoing is a heady and a serious thing—it involves tremendous courage, and it’s also fraught. But undoing is also a space of tremendous opportunity, of utopian reinvention, of unfettered imagination.

Which brings us to the second entry in this highly abridged dictionary. If you happened to take a look at the credits at the top of your program handout, you may have noticed that *Out Here* is the product of a collaboration between Leslie Buxbaum, Erin McKeown, and me. Over the course of the collaboration, the three of us came to refer to ourselves as the tripod. (Court’s Associate Artistic Director Gabby Randle-Bent suggested the moniker in an early production meeting—and it stuck.) And before you roll your eyes—or maybe while you roll your eyes—let me explain.

It’s not like the configuration of our work is self-evident. Leslie was responsible for Book and Lyrics, Erin for Music and Lyrics, and I for... what? Concept? Right there we start to glimpse the complications—and the show’s cumbersome credits reflect this.

Essentially, for the past four-plus years the three of us have been engaged in a fluid dialogue that crosses many of the traditional boundaries of a collaborative team. Not that we’ve all been doing everything. Erin is definitely the composer (but Leslie and David have lots of musical ideas). And Leslie definitely wrote the original script—and is responsible for the book (but Erin and David have lots of script ideas). And I have lots of thoughts about the importance and pleasures of formal play, and the delights of unpredictability, in musicals, and in performance more generally (but so too do Leslie and Erin).

Over the course of these four years and most especially for the past six weeks, the three of us have been collaborating on all the things, thinking together about the book, the music, and the piece. Concretely, this means that we live a good part of our lives in a shared Google doc, that has served as our ‘script’ hub throughout the process, with a nonstop dialogue in the margins.

Each of us speaks a different performance language, and we’re each of us curious about how the other two speak, with a deep admiration for the differences and overlaps in our formulations and perceptions. It’s surely not the most efficient way of proceeding. But we’ve found it to be generative. And since it was cumbersome to always say “Leslie, Erin, and David,” the tripod captured the aspiration to a fundamentally balanced collaboration that has characterized our work. According to Wikipedia, a tripod is “a three-legged stand or frame that supports various objects, such as cameras, telescopes or cauldrons.” Which is to say that the tripod makes it possible to perceive objects very close at hand and very far away, and it likewise makes it possible to cook things up together.

We are so excited to welcome you to the world of this *undo-sical*, and to see it come to life on Court Theatre’s stage with this amazing cast, and all of the extraordinary artists contributing behind the scenes. And we are especially excited that you are joining us for the adventure.

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# A LABORATORY FOR MUSICAL THEATRE

BY MARK SORKIN



A soundproof room for acoustical research, Bell Telephone Laboratories.  
Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive. Via Getty Images.

Developing a new musical requires substantial resources—time, space, funding and more. It’s a lot to ask for, and all the more so in a precarious arts landscape. The creators of *Out Here* are so grateful to have developed this new musical through several partnerships at the University of Chicago.

Indeed, this production’s development is an experiment in creating new forms of support for the arts at the University of Chicago. Over the course of the past four years, *Out Here* received decisive developmental support from a variety of institutional partners: first, from the Richard & Mary L. Gray Center for Arts & Inquiry and the Mellon Foundation, then through an extended partnership between Court Theatre and the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society. The Neubauer Collegium is a research incubator on campus that brings together interdisciplinary teams for collaborative work. *Out Here* is one of several projects underway as part of the Collegium’s Arts Labs initiative. Launched in the 2024–2025 academic year, Arts Labs helps to support the creation of artistic work at and beyond the university. As faculty artists and scholars along with visiting artists and scholars develop a range of collaborative projects, the teams are gathering essential insights into how artistic practice can thrive at a research university. The ultimate ambition is to reshape the culture of arts research and practice on campus.

Arts Labs projects span various genres, including dance, theater, opera, literature, and the visual arts. One project involves the creation of a dance-theater production that explores contemporary forms of masking through the use of social media, AI, and other mediated versions of self. Another brings together creative writing scholars, editors, and poets who are looking at ways to broaden access to the world of contemporary literary publishing. The Movement Theory lab is hosting a series of movement workshops and reading groups for faculty and graduate students interested in practical and conceptual questions about dance. The Opera Lab is supporting a series of workshops at which acclaimed director Yuval Sharon, the inaugural Global Solutions Fellow at the Neubauer Collegium, is working with a small group of collaborators to develop the concept for his upcoming production of Richard Wagner’s Ring cycle at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

What unites these seemingly disparate initiatives is a commitment to investigating how arts practice engages a variety of research disciplines. “Creating an artistic work is a form of research,” said *Out Here* creator Leslie Buxbaum, an Associate Professor in the University’s Committee on Theater and Performance Studies. “You have a question, you have a hunch, you have a set of tools, but you actually don’t know what you’ll find.”

In the case of *Out Here*, Buxbaum began with a question of how to integrate music into an early draft of the script. The first round of support came from the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, which brought composer Erin McKeown to campus in 2022–2023 for a Mellon Fellowship in Arts Practice and Scholarship. McKeown began working with Buxbaum and dramaturg David J. Levin on compositional experiments across talking and speaking. The three of them also co-taught a seminar in Theater & Performance Studies on “(Re-) Queering the American Musical,” which gave them opportunities to explore the history of the form while considering ways that *Out Here* could playfully engage that history. The launch of Arts Labs in 2024 enabled the team to continue workshoping the piece, and supported generative residencies with actors, musicians, a director, and university colleagues.

“This all started from a place of questioning,” Buxbaum said. “David, Erin, and I never felt the pressure of a certain kind of success. We enjoyed the extraordinary luxury of being able to slow down and be stuck in a problem, and emerge in an unexpected place, rather than rush to the next marker of achievement, which speaks to a way that artistic practice is research.”

The research process for *Out Here* does not culminate on opening night. Live theater becomes what it is through its relationship with audiences, performance after performance. That’s where a whole new phase of learning and discovery happens. More broadly, the teams on all five Arts Labs projects are convening regularly to share notes about common challenges they are facing and opportunities they have been able to seize.

For Buxbaum, being part of Arts Labs makes her wonder, “Is there a summation of what we’re learning about supporting the arts on campus, or is this really a set of different case studies where each project has very specific needs?” she asked. “That is an open and active question as we move into the final year of the project.”

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*Mark Sorkin is the Associate Director of Communications at the **Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society**.*

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# MY TIME IN THE ROOM

BY JO SELMECZY, QUAD RESEARCH SCHOLAR

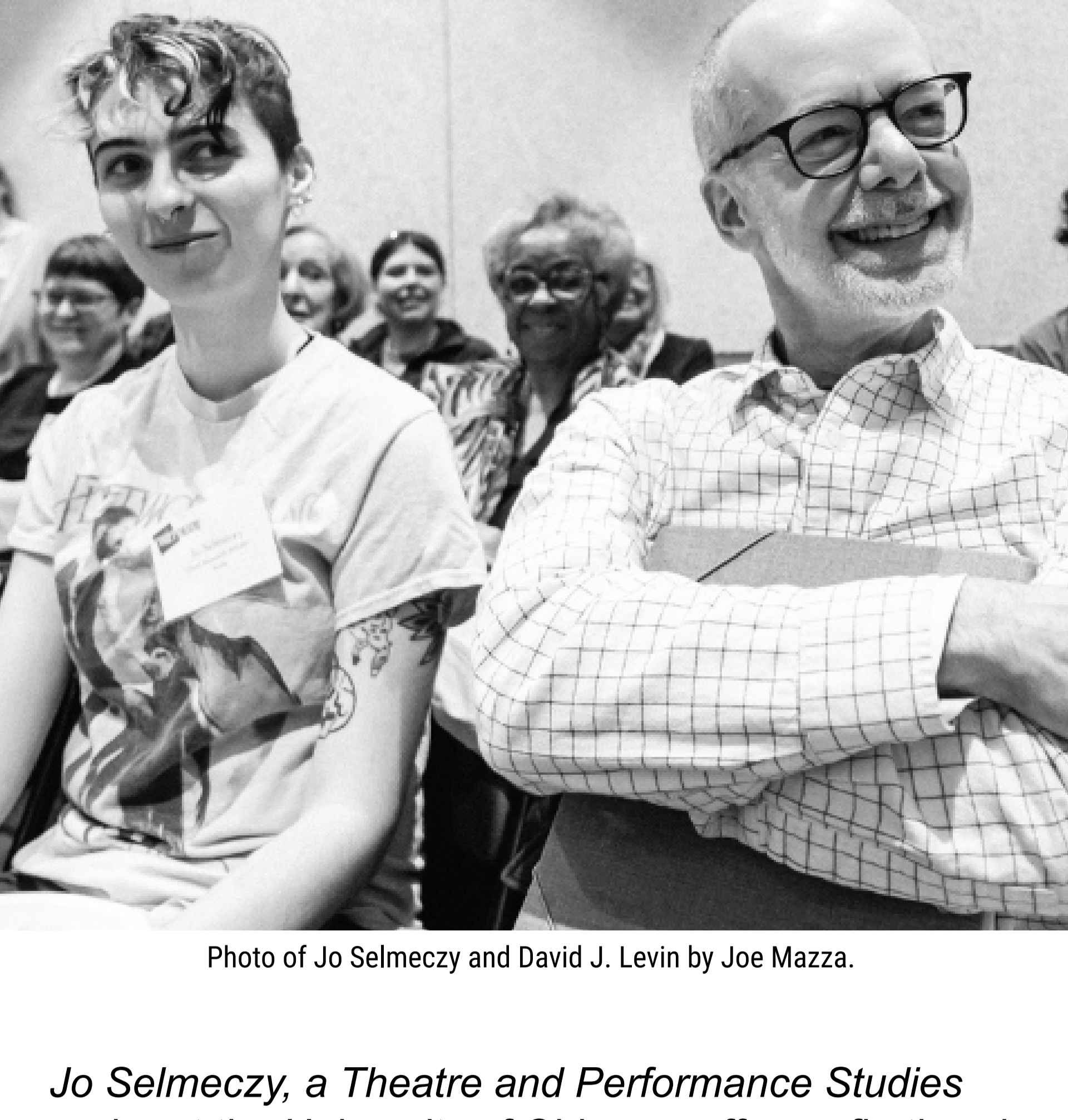


Photo of Jo Selmeczy and David J. Levin by Joe Mazza.

*Jo Selmeczy, a Theatre and Performance Studies major at the University of Chicago, offers a firsthand account of their experience working on Out Here. They give insight into what it means to be “in the room” during the development of a new musical and how that process deepened their sense of collaboration and creative agency.*

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## *In. Hold. Out.*

My skin was buzzing. I could feel the churning in my gut all the way up into the back of my throat. Dry mouth. I watched as my leg jostled the music stand in front of me, nearly knocking the white binder balanced on top of it onto the scuffed black stage floor, and tried to remind myself to just breathe. It was June 2023, I had just finished my first year of college, and being a part of *Out Here* felt as exhilarating as it was anxiety inducing.

I was introduced to *Out Here* through a class taught by Leslie Buxbaum, David J. Levin, and Erin McKeown: *(re)Queering the American Musical*. One day, near the end of the school year, I received an email from Leslie with the subject line “Workshop reader?” In it, I was invited to read the stage directions for *Out Here* in a workshop that would be performed in Theater West at the Logan Center after a week-long rehearsal process. Agreeing to do so served as my introduction to the anxiously exhilarating world of new musical development.



Photo of Erin McKeown, Jo Selmeczy, Z Mowry, Madison Kauffman, Anne Sheridan Smith, Cliff Chamberlain, Avery Moss, Amanda Pulcini, Alex Goodrich in the *Out Here* workshop in July 2025.

There is something precious about a workshop, particularly when it comes to the development of new work, because workshops are meant to be imperfect. They offer opportunities to experiment; to take a rough draft and render it even rougher. They are places for the resulting mess to be instructive, rather than destructive. They are places for new discoveries to emerge and emerge and emerge.

The first *Out Here* workshop was just that—a living, breathing experiment full of discoveries. I felt like a real collaborator in that process, despite being the least experienced member of the team. I could observe, analyze, and perform, all at the same time. After the workshop was presented, it was just over

“What I find most special about *Out Here* lies not solely in its exploration of this complex yet achingly familiar queer narrative, but in its ‘queering’ of the structure of a musical altogether.”

a year and a half before I became directly involved with the project again. This time, it was at Court Theatre. The two workshops I participated in at Court included discussions facilitated by Director Chay Yew, where we (the company) explored our reactions to the narrative, sharing personal anecdotes and comparing experiences across generational lines. These conversations caused me to reflect on my own identity as a queer person, particularly as one only recently legally considered an adult.

A line that has always stuck with me from *Out Here* is when Robin tells Dawn, “You missed the hard.” In the context of the show, Robin is referring to the decades Dawn spent crafting a heteronormative family unit while Robin was experiencing the turmoil of being out for decades prior. Through this exchange, *Out Here* questions what it means to emerge as a queer person after some of the hardest parts associated with being recognized as such have passed.

Frankly, I feel like I’ve also missed much of the “hard.” I didn’t live through the height of the AIDS epidemic. Gay marriage was legalized in the United States by the time I was 10 years old. I was fortunate enough to grow up with an immediate family that was largely accepting of my identity. There exist new and lingering “hards” associated with queerness nowadays, of course, but it is easy to compare “hards” and recognize that I’ve had a relatively easy go of it. Does this mean that my queer identity is less valid compared to someone like Robin? I think not, but it does mean that “queer” means something different for us. Building an intergenerational queer community in spite of that difference while still recognizing its existence is a challenge worth undertaking, in my opinion.

But what I find most special about *Out Here* lies not solely in its exploration of this complex yet achingly familiar queer narrative, but in its “queering” of the structure of a musical altogether. *Out Here* constantly grapples with what it means to sing, speak, and take up space onstage. There are problems that cannot be solved through singing an “I want” song until an epiphany hits, conversations that aren’t made easier by setting them to a musical underscore, and characters that don’t simply disappear when they go offstage. The “hard” cannot simply be skipped over; it must be contended with and struggled through in order to find a resolution. Dramaturgically, these thematic and structural tensions and resonances are the juiciest, and they are what I believe makes this project truly exceptional.

Dance dramaturg Katherine Profeta writes, “The dramaturg’s activity [is] one of continuous motion—between roles, points of view, physical locations.” Being a part of the development of *Out Here* has allowed me to embody this movement, literally shifting roles, perspectives, and locations as I have been invited back to this project time and time again. I will always consider myself privileged to have had the opportunity to work with such incredible collaborators, and am filled with that same exhilarating anxiousness as I look forward to my role on the show as it goes into production. Theatrical time may be compressed, but I can’t help but selfishly want to stretch the time I get to spend with *Out Here* for just a breath longer.

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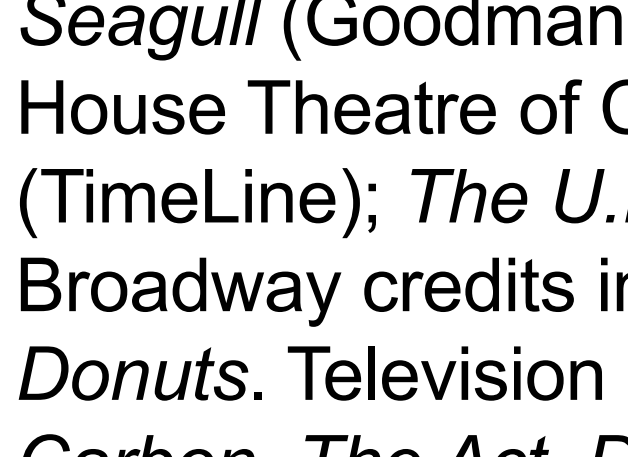
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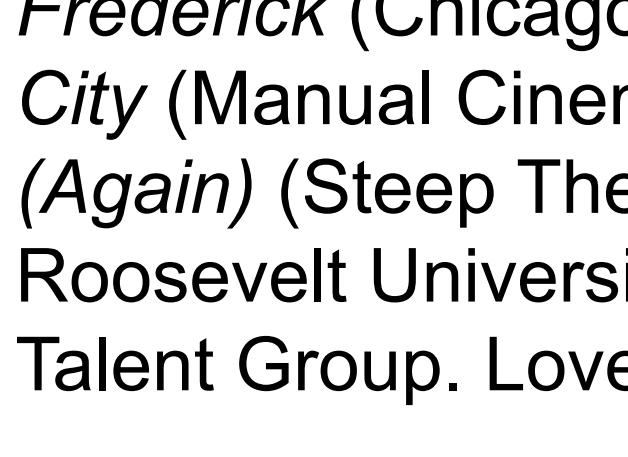
# ARTIST PROFILES



**BECCA AYERS** (*Dawn*) is thrilled to make their Court Theatre debut! Broadway credits include: *1776* (revival featuring a cast of all trans, non-binary, and female performers), *South Pacific* (original revival cast), *My Fair Lady*, *The Addams Family*, *Avenue Q*, and *Les Miserables* (original first revival cast). Off-Broadway credits include: *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Dogfight*, *Giant*, and *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Becca is a singer/songwriter with songs on most streaming platforms under their name and their former band's name, baby goes bang. Becca is a graduate of Stephens (women's) College in Columbia, MO. Their sister, Heather Ayers, is also a Broadway actor. [BeccaAyers.com](http://BeccaAyers.com). @becca\_\_ayers.

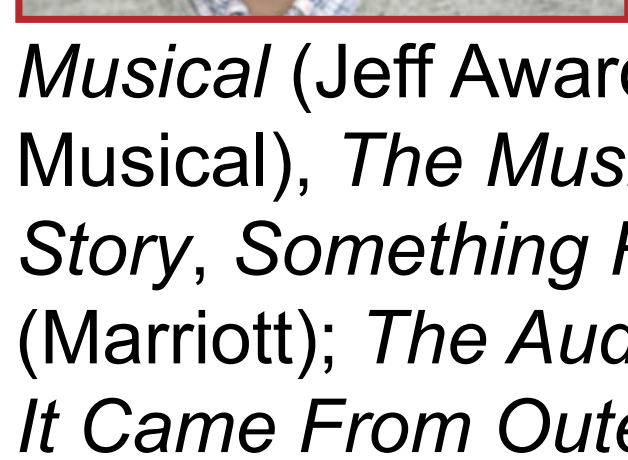


**CLIFF CHAMBERLAIN** (*Brian*) makes his Court Theatre debut with *Out Here*. Chicago credits include: *You Will Get Sick*, *Fool For Love*, *The Minutes*, *Belleville*, *Clybourne Park*, *Superior Donuts* (Steppenwolf); *The Seagull* (Goodman Theatre); *The Sparrow* (The House Theatre of Chicago); *Dolly West's Kitchen* (TimeLine); *The U.N. Inspector* (Next Theatre). Broadway credits include: *The Minutes*, *Superior Donuts*. Television credits include: *Homeland*, *Altered Carbon*, *The Act*, *Dirty John*, *State of Affairs*, *Paper Girls*. Film credits include: *The Rip*, *Moses the Black*, *The Wise Kids*. Cliff is a graduate of UC Santa Barbara and is an Ensemble Member with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Love to R + E + E + C.

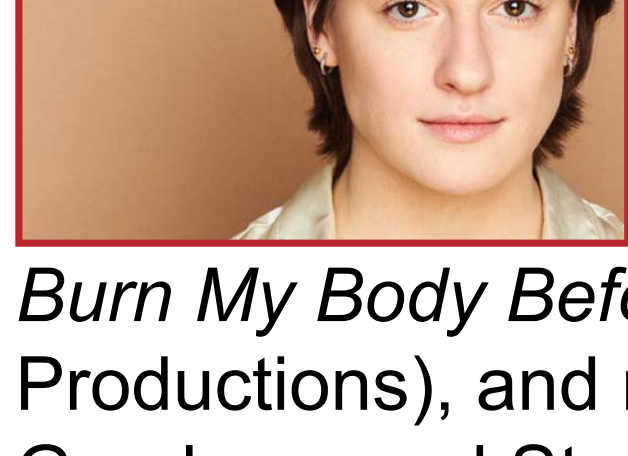


**ELLIE DUFFEY** (*Cleo*)'s previous Court credits include the world premiere of *Berlin* (Jeff Award–Best Ensemble). Other Chicago credits include:

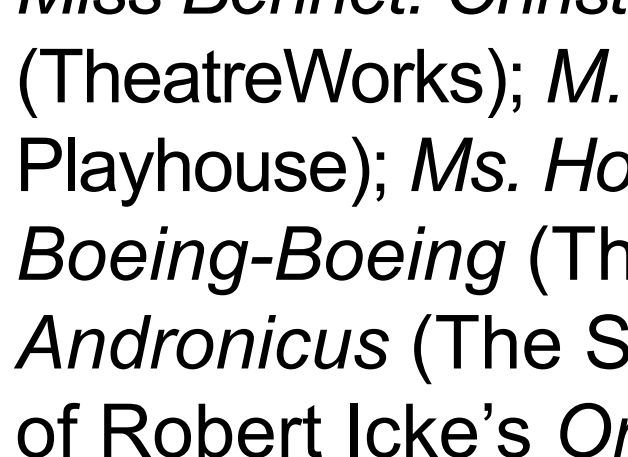
*Frederick* (Chicago Children's Theatre), *The Magic City* (Manual Cinema), *Happy Days Are Here (Again)* (Steep Theatre). She is a recent graduate of Roosevelt University and is represented by Gray Talent Group. Love to Mom, Dad, and Clair.



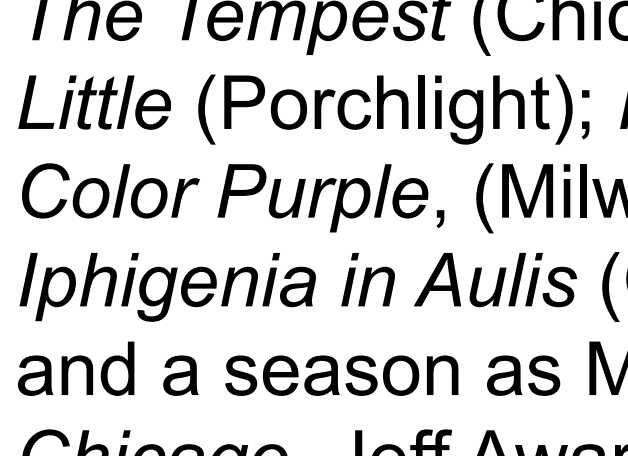
**ALEX GOODRICH** (*Martin*) is thrilled to be returning to Court Theatre. Chicago credits include *Fen*, *The Mousetrap*, *Photograph 51* (Court Theatre); *Hero: The Musical* (Jeff Award–Best Supporting Actor in a Musical), *The Music Man*, *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story*, *Something Rotten!*, and *Hello, Dolly!* (Marriott); *The Audience* (Drury Lane); *Twelfth Night, It Came From Outer Space*, *Hamlet* (Chicago Shakespeare); *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*, *Shining Lives*, *Civil War Christmas*, *She Stoops to Conquer* (Northlight); *Old Jews Telling Jokes* (Royal George); *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Writers); *Everything Is Illuminated* (Next). TV credits include *Chicago Fire* and *Shining Girls*. He loves his wife and two kids very, very much!



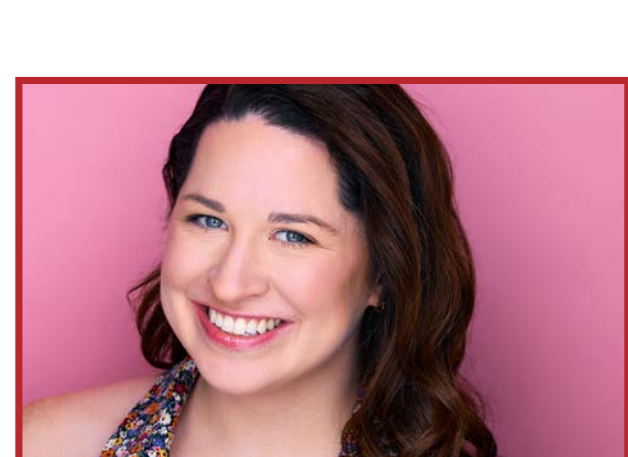
**Z MOWRY** (*Jett*) is stoked to be making their Court debut with such a special piece! Recent credits include Medium Alison in *Fun Home* (Porchlight), Eris in *Burn My Body Before They Find It* (Genderfucked Productions), and new works in process at Goodman and Steppenwolf. Outside of theatre, Z enjoys cooking, hosting, and going to the library. Much love as always to the Chicago queer community. Hire trans talent! @zzmowry.



**AMANDA PULCINI** (*Gina, Dance Captain*) is excited to make her Court Theatre debut! Regional credits: *Georgiana and Kitty: Christmas at Pemberley*, *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*, *Mrs. Christie* (TheatreWorks); *M. Butterfly* (San Francisco Playhouse); *Ms. Holmes and Ms. Watson, Apt. 2B*; *Boeing-Boeing* (Third Avenue Playworks); *Titus Andronicus* (The Shakespeare Forum); US premiere of Robert Icke's *Oresteia* (The Theatre School at DePaul). TV credits: *Chicago P.D.*, *The Big Leap*. Film credits: *Soul On Fire* (w/ William H. Macy); *The Driftless*; *Hey, I'm Home*; *Pas De Deux*; and more. MFA–The Theatre School at DePaul University. BFA–Shenandoah Conservatory. Certified Intimacy Coordinator & Intimacy Director with IDC. [AmandaPulcini.com](http://AmandaPulcini.com). @apulcini.



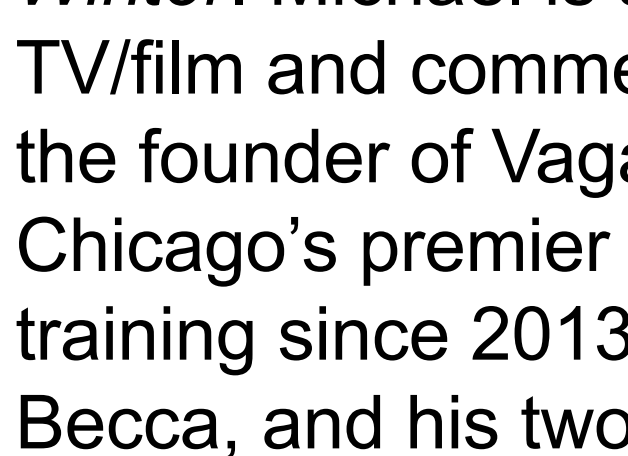
**BETHANY THOMAS** (*Robin*) is grateful to return to Court Theatre! Credits include: *Porgy and Bess* (Court); *A Christmas Carol* (Goodman); *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*, *Once, Into the Woods*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (Writers); *Songs for Nobodies*, *Marie and Rosetta* (Northlight); *The Tempest* (Chicago Shakespeare); *Marry Me a Little* (Porchlight); *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *The Color Purple*, (Milwaukee Rep); *Waitress* (PCPA); *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Court Theatre at the Getty Villa), and a season as Madame Z in *Teatro ZinZanni Chicago*. Jeff Award winner, 3Arts Awardee, Lunt-Fontanne Fellow, Fly Honey. Listen to Bethany's original music on all streaming platforms! @bethanyt80.



**LEXI ALIOTO** (u/s *Dawn*) is thrilled to be making her Court Theatre debut with *Out Here*. Chicago credits include: *Drunk Shakespeare*, *The Second City*, *Theater Wit*, *PrideArts*, *Black Ensemble Theater*, *First Folio*, *Lifeline Theatre*, *Annoyance Theatre*, and many more. She has toured regionally as an ensemble member of *The Second City* hit show, *She The People*, to both San Diego Repertory Theatre and Boston's Huntington Theatre Company. Currently, she is an understudy for *The Second City's* National Touring Company. She is a comedic writer with her group, *Hot Girlz*. Rep: Grossman & Jack Talent. Follow @aalioto92. Love to her family and friends.



**DANIELLE DAVIS** (u/s *Robin/Gina*) Select Chicago: *Antigone* (Court Theatre); *A Christmas Carol*, *Holiday Inn* (Drury Lane Theatre); *Rome Sweet Rome*, *Corduroy*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Dream, A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Arthur and Friends Make a Musical!*, *1776* (Marriott Theatre); *CLYDE'S*, *The Music Man* (Goodman Theatre); *BLKS* (Steppenwolf Theatre); *Fun Home* (Victory Gardens). New York: *How To Catch Creation* (Geva Theatre Center). Television: *The Chi*, *Shameless*, *Chicago P.D.*, *Empire*, *Sense8*, *Easy*. Davis is represented by Stewart Talent-Chicago.



**MICHAEL McCracken** (u/s *Brian/Martin*) is honored to be invited back to Court for this production of *Out Here* after being involved with the workshop process. Previously, he understudied the wonderful John Hoogenakker in Court Theatre's *The Lion in Winter*. Michael is a SAG-AFTRA actor working on TV/film and commercials here in Chicago. He is also the founder of Vagabond School of the Arts, Chicago's premier school for on-camera acting training since 2013. He would like to thank his wife, Becca, and his two boys for all of their support.



**AVERY MOSS** (u/s *Cleo/Jett*) is ecstatic to be making her Court Theatre debut with *Out Here* after being involved in the incredible July 2025 workshop! She recently graduated from UC Berkeley (go bears!), where she appeared as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde: The Musical* (Barestage). Recent Film/TV credits include *Most Guys are Losers*, *Candyman*, and *The Watchful Eye*. Much love to Stewart Talent Chicago; best team ever! @averymoss.

**DANIELA BISENIUS** (*Violin*) was born in Bucharest, Romania and began playing the violin at age five. She trained at the prestigious George Enescu Music School and became the youngest musician to win a position with the Staatsphilharmonie Ludwigshafen Germany. Daniela's career includes performances with major orchestras such as Naples Philharmonic, Phoenix Symphony, and Lyric Opera of Chicago, as well as artists Natalie Cole, Luther Vandross, Smokie Robinson, and Kurt Elling, among others. Today, she is an active musician and devoted teacher, believing that inspiring others through music is not just her profession, but her life's purpose.

**PERCY NESBARY III** (*Guitar*) is a professional musician, producer, actor and Chicago native. He is thrilled to be making his Court Theatre debut with this production. Whether he's producing tracks in the studio, acting on screen (Hulu's *Justified: City Primeval*), or performing in stage favorites like *Blues in the Night*, Percy brings a multidisciplinary perspective to every project.

**RACHEL SCHULDT** (*Cello*) makes her Court Theatre debut! Chicago credits include: *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Assassins*, *Grey Gardens* (Theo); *Jekyll & Hyde*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Alice by Heart* (Kokandy); *Fun Home* (Porchlight); *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* (Music Theater Works); *Cats* (Paramount, substitute); *Oklahoma!* (Marriott, substitute); *Mary Rose* (Black Button Eyes Productions); *Big Fish* (BoHo); *Lizzie* (Firebrand); *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* (Roosevelt University); *Fun Home*, *Violet* (Loyola University); *High Fidelity* (Columbia College).

**MADDI VOGEL** (*Percussion*) graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a bachelor's degree in music. In addition to musical theatre, Maddi plays drums in Too Much Molly Band, teaches lessons at School of Rock, and bartends at the Apollo Theater. On Friday nights, you can find them playing percussion for Second City's improvised musical show, *Shamilton*. Recent pit orchestra credits include *She Loves Me* (Harper College), *Next to Normal* (Point2Point Productions), *Tell Me On A Sunday* (Theo Theatre), and the Chicago Music Theatre Festival '24-25 (Kokandy).



# *OUT HERE* PUBLIC PROGRAMS

## **FILM SCREENING: FEMALE GAYS**

Friday, April 3

An evening of lesbian cinema exploring queer liberation.

## **AGORA SERIES: WE ARE STILL BECOMING**

Saturday, April 25 and Sunday, May 3

A two-part conversation series presented in partnership with the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project.

## **COMMUNITY READS SERIES**

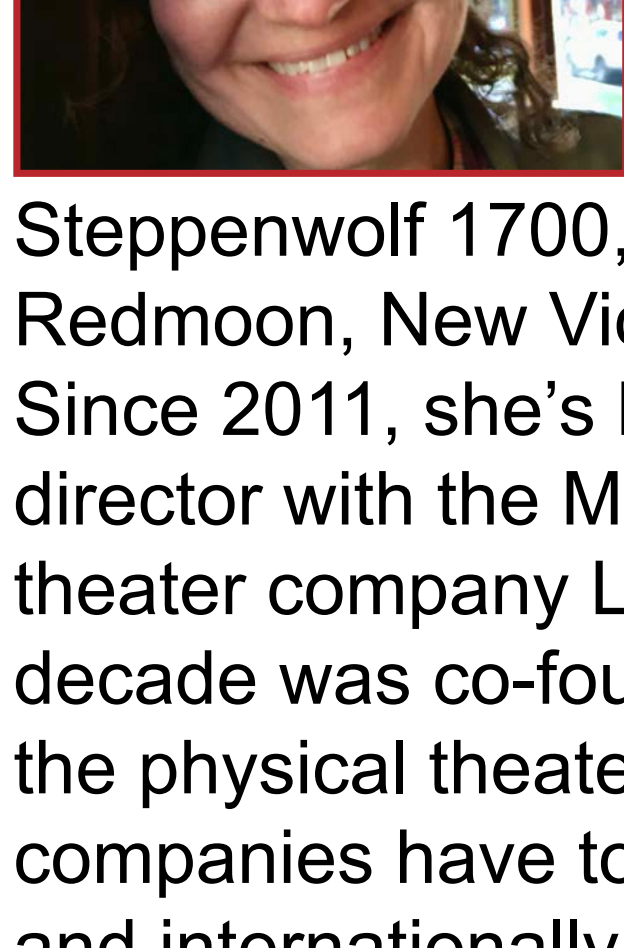
Monday, April 27: Book Club featuring *Queer Legacies*.

Saturday, May 2: Post-show discussion after *Out Here*.

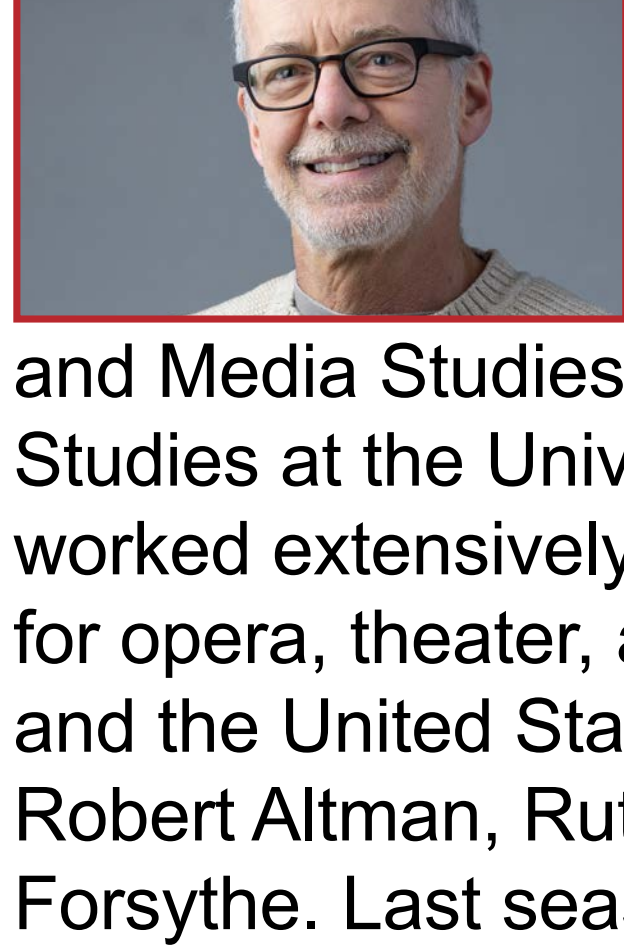
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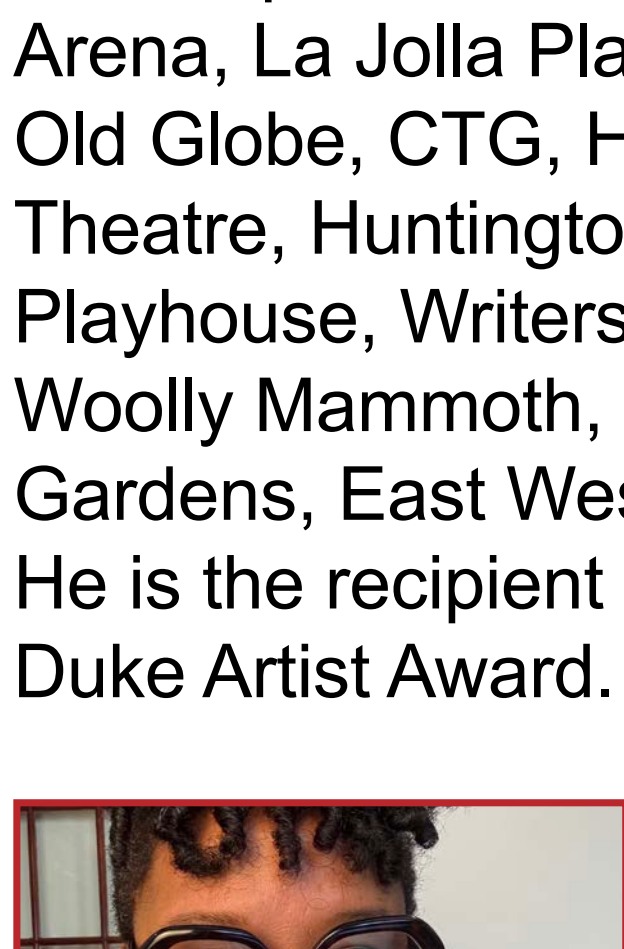
# ARTIST PROFILES



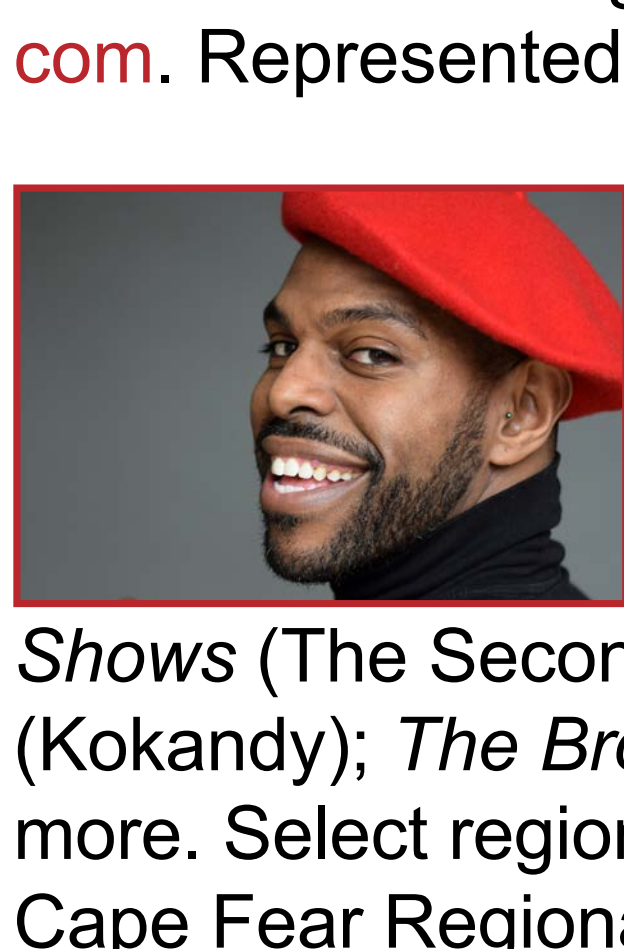
**LESLIE BUXBAUM**'s (*Concept, Book, Lyrics*) writing/directing credits: Grammy award-winning Third Coast Percussion, About Face, House Theatre, Steppenwolf 1700, The Actors Gymnasium, Redmoon, New Victory, PS 122, among others. Since 2011, she's been a collaborating writer and director with the MacArthur award-winning dance-theater company Lucky Plush Productions, and for a decade was co-founder, co-writer and director with the physical theater company 500 Clown. Both companies have toured widely throughout the US and internationally. Being an actor with NYC's Elevator Repair Service many years ago was a formative experience. Leslie is Associate Professor of Practice in Theater and Performance Studies, University of Chicago.



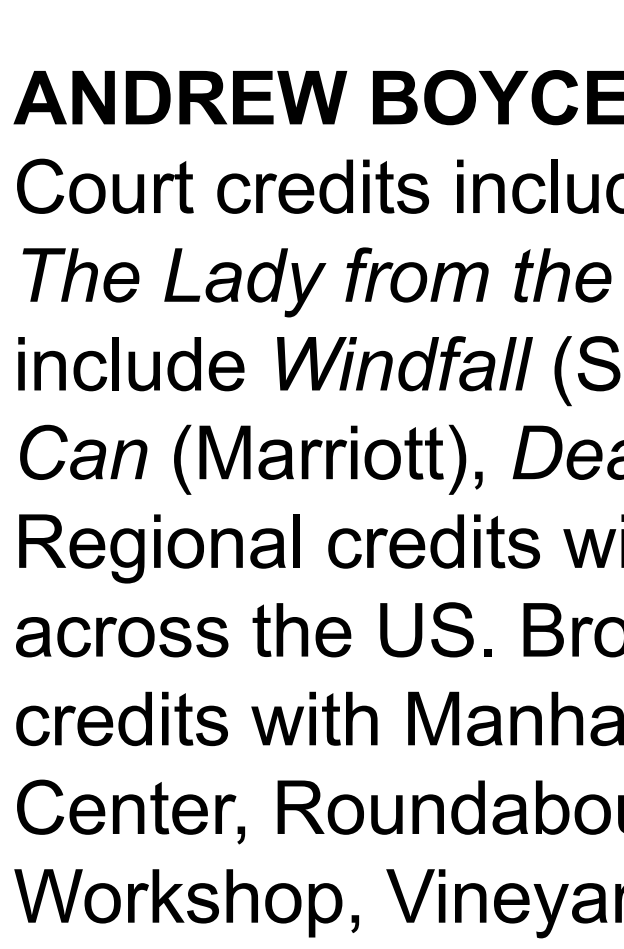
**ERIN McKEOWN** (*Concept, Music, Lyrics, Orchestration*) is a musician, writer, and producer who has released 13 albums since their 2000 debut, *Distillation*. As a bandleader, they have performed at Bonnaroo, Glastonbury, and the Newport Folk Festival, and their songs are a familiar presence on NPR, the BBC, as well as on television and in advertising. Their first musical, *Miss You Like Hell*, written with Quiara Alegria Hudes, premiered at La Jolla Playhouse, then opened Off-Broadway at The Public Theater in 2018, where it was nominated for five Drama Desk Awards. A graduate of Brown, Erin has taught at their alma mater, the University of Chicago, and Smith College. [erinmckeown.com](http://erinmckeown.com).



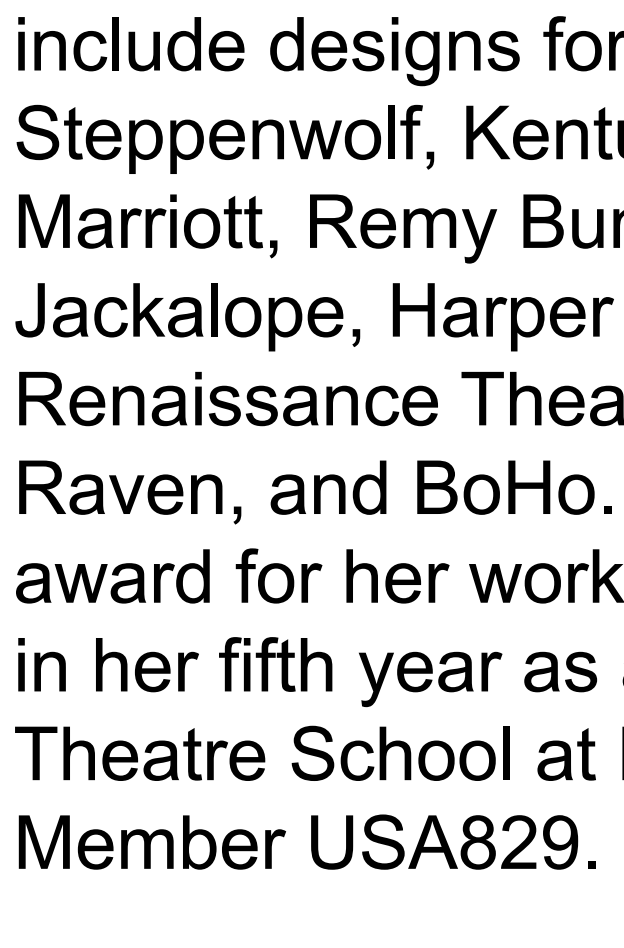
**DAVID J. LEVIN** (*Concept, Production Dramaturg*) is the Alice H. and Stanley G. Harris Distinguished Service Professor of Germanic Studies, Cinema and Media Studies, and Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago. David has worked extensively as a dramaturg and collaborator for opera, theater, and ballet productions in Germany and the United States, working with, among others, Robert Altman, Ruth Berghaus, and William Forsythe. Last season, he was production dramaturg on Charles Newell's award-winning Court Theatre production of *Berlin*. Beginning in 2028, he is collaborating with Yuval Sharon on a new production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.



**CHAY YEW** (*Director*)'s New York credits include The Public Theater, Playwrights Horizons, New York Theatre Workshop, Roundabout, Signature Theatre, New York City Center Encores!, Audible, Perelman Performing Arts Center, Flea, Rattlestick, Playwrights Realm, Ensemble Studio Theatre, NAATCO, and Ma Yi. His regional credits include the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Goodman, Berkeley Rep, Arena, La Jolla Playhouse, Alley, South Coast Rep, Old Globe, CTG, Hartford Stage, Denver Center Theatre, Huntington, Seattle Rep, Cincinnati Playhouse, Writers Theatre, Humana Festival, Woolly Mammoth, Portland Center Stage, Victory Gardens, East West Players, Singapore Rep, etc. He is the recipient of an OBIE Award and a Doris Duke Artist Award.



**CHRISTIE CHILES TWILLIE** (*Music Supervisor, Orchestration, Keyboard, Conductor*) is a pianist, music director, sound designer, composer, and orchestrator/arranger. Credits include: *The Girl Who Sang With The Moon* (DCASE New Works Development); *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Once on This Island*, *Jelly's Last Jam* (Cape Fear); *The Color Purple* (Pennsylvania Shakespeare); *A Year with Frog and Toad*, *Milo Imagines the World* (Chicago Children's); *Dreamgirls* (Paramount, Goodspeed, McCarter); *HAIR* (Asolo); *Five Guys Named Moe*, *Newsies*, *The Gospel at Colonus* (Skylight). Footlights Best Musical Direction Award—Professional Production, a Rachel Rockwell "Fierce Women Behind The Table" Award, and a BTAA nomination for Original Score. [christiechilestwillie.com](http://christiechilestwillie.com). Represented by Michael Moore Agency.



**BREON ARZELL** (*Movement Director*) is delighted to make his Court Theatre debut. Chicago credits include: *The Color Purple* (Goodman); *Black Excellence Shows* (The Second City); *American Psycho* (Kokandy); *The Brothers Size* (Steppenwolf); and more. Select regional credits include: Signature, Cape Fear Regional Theatre, Woolly Mammoth, MUNY, the Kennedy Center, Olney Theatre Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival. International credits in Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Singapore. Education: DePaul, Northwestern, University of Illinois-Chicago. Film/TV credits: *The 4400*, *South Side*, *Whole + Six Feet Apart*, and *Blacksite*. He has received five Jeff Awards, two Black Theater Alliance Awards, and the Helen Hayes Award for Best Choreography. [breonarzell.com](http://breonarzell.com). @breonarzell.

**ANDREW BOYCE** (*Co-Scenic Designer*)'s recent Court credits include *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Lady from the Sea*. Recent Chicago credits include *Windfall* (Steppenwolf), *Catch Me If You Can* (Marriott), *Dear Evan Hansen* (Paramount). Regional credits with most major regional theaters across the US. Broadway: *Dana H*. Off-Broadway credits with Manhattan Theatre Club, Lincoln Center, Roundabout, Atlantic, New York Theatre Workshop, Vineyard, Primary Stages, among others. Opera credits include Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Boston Lyric Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Opera Omaha, Curtis Institute, among others. MFA Yale School of Drama. Associate Professor of Design at Northwestern. [andrewboycedesign.com](http://andrewboycedesign.com).

**LAUREN M. NICHOLS** (*Co-Scenic Designer*) is a designer and model-maker native to Chicago. Credits include *Dhaba on Devon Avenue* and *Hot Wing King* (Writers); *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *True West* (Paramount); and *Ain't Misbehavin* (Milwaukee Rep). Other credits include designs for Olney Theatre, Drury Lane, Steppenwolf, Kentucky Opera, Village Theatre, Marriott, Remy Bumppo, Rivendell, Lifeline, Steep, Jackalope, Harper College, Shattered Globe, Renaissance Theaterworks, The Gift, Firebrand, Raven, and BoHo. In 2025, she received a Jeff award for her work with Teatro Vista. She is currently in her fifth year as an adjunct professor at The Theatre School at DePaul. MFA Northwestern. Member USA829. [laurenangeldesigns.com](http://laurenangeldesigns.com).

**CHRISTINE PASCUAL** (*Costume Designer*) previously designed costumes for *East Texas Hot Links*, *The Lion in Winter*, *Two Trains Running*, and many others at Court. Other credits: *Black Sunday*, *Notes from the Field*, *Boulevard of Bold Dreams*, *Trouble in Mind*, *Relentless*, *Oslo* (TimeLine); *Dhaba on Devon Avenue* (Writers); *Twelfth Night* (Chicago Shakespeare); *La Ruta* (Steppenwolf); *Lady in Denham* (Goodman); *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* (Second Stage); Regionally: *The Niceties* (Milwaukee Rep); *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Baltimore Stage); *Hard Cell* (Geva); *Simpatico* (McCarter). Additionally, she has designed at Victory Gardens Theater, Teatro Vista, and Congo Square. She received the Michael Merritt Award for Excellence in Design and Collaboration in 2025. Her portfolio website is at [christinepascual.carbonmade.com](http://christinepascual.carbonmade.com).

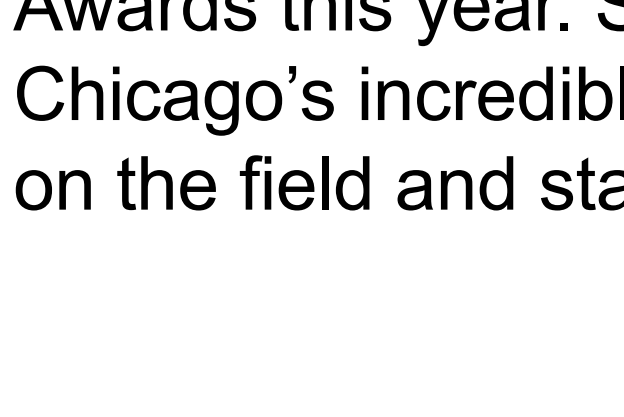
**LEE FISKNESS** (*Lighting Designer*) returns to Court after having designed *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Chicago credits include: Steppenwolf, Goodman, Chicago Shakespeare, Drury Lane, Victory Gardens, Marriott, Writers, Lookingglass, Lightscape (Chicago Botanical Garden). Regional credits include: The Old Globe, Alliance, Kennedy Center, Manhattan Theatre Club, Mark Taper Forum, Cincinnati Playhouse, Milwaukee Rep, Merrimack, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Arsht Center. Opera credits include: Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Jose, Dallas, Portland, Kentucky, Colorado, Florentine. International credits include: *Jurassic World Exhibition* (China), *Marriage of Figaro* (Japan), *Movement Stories* (Abu Dhabi). He has also worked extensively in television, corporate events, art installations, museums, and more. [leefiskness.com](http://leefiskness.com).

**MIKHAIL FIKSEL** (*Sound Designer*) is an award-winning designer, composer, DJ, and audio producer. Previous work includes *Titanic* (Court); *Amadeus*, *Fool for Love* (Steppenwolf); *Little Bear Ridge Road*, *Dana H*. (Broadway); *Mexodus* (Audible Theatre, Berkeley Rep, and Baltimore Center Stage), and multiple audio productions for Audible Originals and Make Believe Association. Most recent awards include the 2022 Tony Award for Sound Design, 2023 Signal Award for Original Music, and the 2024 Michael Merritt Award for Excellence in Design and Collaboration. He is a proud member of USA and TSDCA, a faculty member at Columbia College Chicago, and runs a recording studio and creative arts space, Tigtrope Collective. [mikhailfiksel.com](http://mikhailfiksel.com).

**SAMMI GRANT** (*Vocal and Dialect Consultant*) previously worked on Court's productions of *Miss Julie*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Big White Fog*, *Berlin*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Falsettos*, *Stokely: The Unfinished Revolution*. Other Chicago credits include: *A Christmas Carol* (Goodman); *Black Sunday*, *The Lehman Trilogy*, *Relentless* (TimeLine); *Gorgeous* (Raven Theatre/Rivendell Theatre); and many more. Film/TV credits include: *Rescued by Ruby*, *Patriot*, *The Exorcist*. Sammi is an Assistant Professor and Co-Head of Voice and Speech at The Theatre School at DePaul University. She holds an MFA with Distinction in Voice Studies from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

**KATRINA HERRMANN** (*Production Stage Manager*) is excited to be back at Court, having previously worked on *Falsettos*, *The Lion in Winter*, and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Chicago credits include: *Short Shakespeare! Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hymn*, *The Comedy of Errors* (Chicago Shakespeare); *Twisted Melodies* (Northlight); *Lucy and Charlie's Honeymoon*, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (Lookingglass); *DEBATE: Baldwin vs. Buckley*, *Juno* (TimeLine). Regional credits include: *Diana the Musical*, *Queens* (La Jolla Playhouse); *The Garden*, *Twisted Melodies* (Baltimore Center Stage). Off-Broadway credits include: *The Flick*, *The Whale*, *Circle Mirror Transformation* (Playwrights Horizons). BFA in stage management, DePaul University; MBA, Adams State University. Katrina is a proud AEA member.

**JACLYNN JOSLIN** (*Assistant Stage Manager*) is returning to Court Theatre after working on *Big White Fog*; *A Raisin in the Sun*; *East Texas Hot Links*; *The Lion in Winter*; *Arsenic and Old Lace*; *Two Trains Running*; *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*; *Oedipus Rex*; *The Adventures of Augie March*; *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*; *Photograph 51* and many others. Her other credits include: *Amadeus*, *The Book of Grace*, *Leroy and Lucy*, *Little Bear Ridge Road*, *PurPOSE*, *No Man's Land*, *Last Night and the Night Before*, *Bald Sisters*, *King James*, *Bug*, *True West*, and many others (Steppenwolf); and *Oklahoma!* (regional tour).



**DR. AVERY WILLIS HOFFMAN** (*Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director*) is proud to join Court Theatre. Avery recently served as inaugural Artistic Director, Brown Arts Institute and Professor of the Practice of Arts and Classics at Brown University. Over the last two decades, she has curated multidisciplinary projects as inaugural Program Director at Park Avenue Armory, led content development for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History, managed Avery Productions, and produced multiple artistic collaborations with director Peter Sellars. A Marshall Scholar, Avery earned a DPhil and MSt in Classical Languages and Literature from Oxford, and a BA in Classics and English from Stanford.



**ANGEL YSAGUIRRE** (*Executive Director*) has been Court's Executive Director since 2018. Prior to this role, he served as Executive Director of Illinois Humanities. During his tenure there, the organization established a number of new programs demonstrating the contribution that the humanities can make in addressing today's most pressing challenges. Previously, he was the Director of Global Community Investing at Boeing and a Program Officer at the McCormick Tribune Foundation. He has served on the boards of the Poetry Foundation, Theatre Communications Group, Forefront Illinois, Restore Justice, and Chicago Dancemakers Forum.



**DR. GABRIELLE RANDLE-BENT** (*Associate Artistic Director*) is a mother, director, dramaturg, and scholar. Her directorial highlights include *Miss Julie*; *A Raisin in the Sun*; *Antigone*; *The Island*; and *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (co-directed with Charles Newell) at Court Theatre; *1919* (Steppenwolf); and *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Remy Bumppo). She is a co-founder of the Civic Actor Studio, a leadership program of the University of Chicago's Office of Civic Engagement. She has a BA in Drama from Stanford University, an MA in Performance as Public Practice from the University of Texas at Austin, and a PhD from Northwestern University.



**HEIDI THOMPSON SAUNDERS** (*Managing Director*) has dedicated her entire professional career to Chicago theatre, including 15 years at Court Theatre where she is proud to be part of the leadership team. Prior to coming to Court, Heidi worked as a stage manager and technician for many storefront theaters and spent four years as the Executive Director of PlayMakers Laboratory. Heidi has served on committees or boards for the League of Resident Theaters, Cabrini Green Legal Aid, the Chicago Family Theater Association, the Chicago Comedy Association, the Illinois Theatre Association, and is currently the Chair of the Board of the League of Chicago Theatres.



**BECCA MCCRACKEN** (*Director of Casting and Artist Cultivation*) celebrates her twentieth year in casting! Her work has taken her across the U.S. in theatre, film, television, and commercials. She's proud to call the Tony Award-winning Court Theatre home for the past eight years, casting more than 30 productions. A proud member of the Casting Society (CSA), Becca serves on the governing board and is a three-time Artios Award winner and nominated for three Artios Awards this year. She leads with heart, championing Chicago's incredible acting community—and her kids on the field and stage.

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# NO SMALL PLANS: KRISTEN KAZA IN CONVERSATION WITH KAMILAH RASHIED



The Whistler cocktail bar, the first home of Slo 'Mo: Slow Jams for Queer Fam (2019, photo by Erik Michael Kommer).

*In this conversation, Director of Engagement Kamilah Rashied sits down with cultural producer Kristen Kaza to discuss the evolution of her career and the founding of her company, No Small Plans Productions. Kaza established the company to bridge the gap between major institutions and Chicago's independent artists, guided by the ethos of "parties with a purpose." This intentionality is a vital through-line for Court Theatre's current public programming, which echoes the themes of the new musical, Out Here, by centering queer intergenerational storytelling and the power of the first-person narrative.*

*Across her body of work, Kaza emphasizes the necessity of cultivating spaces for belonging, fostering intergenerational queer connection through events like Old Gold (an LGBTQ+ day party for the 30+ community) to her current focus on the intimate, firsthand documentation of her own life and motherhood as part of her in progress memoir project, Mother Lover.*

**Kamilah:** How did No Small Plans Productions come about?

**Kristen:** I was working at the *Chicago Reader* at the time, producing events, and creating more of a connection between readers and community, and the paper, which of course was an institution, had gone through quite a bit of tumult after almost 40 years of being independent. It was my first time there, supporting a transition [for the paper to] be purchased by the *Sun-Times*. It gave me a lot of experience working with Chicago artists and organizations, being that it's such a Chicago-centered media publication.

That's just something that I wanted to do and double down on more, noticing that so many events and programs and lineups were built for vendors and artists that weren't from Chicago. Seeing such a dearth of presence of women in lineups in music in particular, because that's the artistic space that I move in the most. I started No Small Plans because I really wanted to help be that bridge between institutions, brands and independent, emerging artists and small businesses in Chicago.

You know my No Small Plan slogan is "parties with a purpose," and really focuses on intentionality scaffolding events.

**Kamilah:** That's beautiful. I don't know that I have ever heard it described that way, but it makes so much sense, because your events have run the gamut, but have always had a very civic thread, which I admire as a producer and administrator. I think queer spaces and third spaces for socializing or partying have always been inherently political, but I really appreciate the way you've made that thread explicit.

**Kristen:** Yeah, you can't separate it, right? And it's a very interesting line to walk when you're working with institutions and corporations—trying to usher them along, but also not being the final decision maker when you're a contractor. So when I am doing these collaborations that's something that I think that I have, over time, really honed a very special skill in. It's a lot of responsibility, because you have artists and small businesses who are trusting you to advocate for them, and then you have these brands and institutions who are having you go back to those businesses and artists when you have to make negotiations or say no. It's a very auspicious position to be in between the two and something I have a lot of pride in. It amazes me [how far we've] come [on] these projects.

They would have vendors or artists they're flying in, DJs from other cities, or working with the biggest caterers in the city. We don't have to do these things this way. These are the types of gigs that really open the doors for these [local] businesses and artists. Especially working with so many institutions in Chicago, like the MCA, Navy Pier, or DCASE, it's so critically important that new people are being able to have an opportunity in those spaces.

Over time, I've just tried to really focus on how to look at equity in a really comprehensive way, and take accountability for the fact that if you are a producer, you are taking on a lot of responsibility and risk, and that risk can come with great reward—it can also come with great vulnerability. How do you scaffold your event with partners where there's transparency and understanding in how things are going to flow. So much nuance.

**Kamilah:** I take that personally. I internalize that a great deal in my work also. A lot of my job becomes turning towards the organization, as an advocate of our community and arts partners, to explain the ways that I need to work to really honor them. Many of the people that we partner with are not part of big institutions that have resources or time to lose.

"I think at the end of the day, we seek out these spaces to have a sense of belonging, you know? And I think that's why third spaces are being sought out [right now], because people aren't getting that feeling of belonging online. It is presented as this very shiny thing [that] gives you that quick dopamine [hit], and people are realizing this is not sustainable. So they're seeking out third space because they want meaningful connection."

**Kamilah:** What other values, interests or curiosities have guided your work? With all the different hats you wear as an event producer, a convener, an advocate for the queer community. What's driving you?

**Kristen:** My desire to cultivate and be a part of cultivating spaces of belonging. I think at the end of the day, we seek out these spaces to have a sense of belonging, you know? And I think that's why third spaces are being sought out [right now], because people aren't getting that feeling of belonging online. It is presented as this very shiny thing [that] gives you that quick dopamine [hit], and people are realizing this is not sustainable. So they're seeking out third space because they want meaningful connection.

One of the skills that I've honed over time, something that's important to me, is what is your experience going to be then? What [does] belonging mean? Something different to everyone. Inclusion is really aspirational, right? Because there's no way that you're always going to be able to know and then accommodate every person's need that walks in. But it's really [the] small things that make that difference. For example having moved through pregnancy as a party promoter. I wanted to see more pregnant people and parents in the club and feel like they belonged there. Sometimes you just need to be able to have a seat, you know? And so we started having a statement that said, if you have mobility challenges, if you're pregnant or postpartum email us, and we'll reserve a seat for you. It's just this small signal that says, I'm thinking about what your experience is when you come here.

**Kamilah:** You've been really candid about a growing desire to document your own experience and your own life. Why does documenting your life feel important at this point in your creative life and career?

**Kristen:** Thank you for asking about that. On a deeply personal note, I'm hardwired to orient around the needs of the collective. Something my dad says is your greatest strengths are your greatest liabilities, so that's a great strength. Oftentimes, though, the compromise was at my own expense, so that was the liability of it. I think I'm in a time now where I've never been so close to riding the line of my own capacity. Prior to children, I could just keep going and going. There was always a cost. But the stakes are so different now that I have people depending on me that I go home to.

A lot of my work has been how do I edit this so that I'm not completely leaving myself out, but from a public point of view, still prioritizing the collective. Writing is an opportunity to focus on and share [more of ] my interior. I have been open about my life and my experiences and the fact that I'm a mother now, and I have children. But I haven't yet really been able to show up in this new era of my life. [When] people are really used to you performing at a certain level, it can be difficult to adjust to that. Writing is very vulnerable, and I haven't established that practice just yet because of my capacity, and because of my orientation around getting things so correct.

[I've] amassed a lot of experiences. Being a mother, pregnancy, forming a family, we have a very non-traditional family, and we've been very open about that. I would like to take that more into the public and give that more space to be tended to. I think that I have given quite a lot to nightlife and entertainment over these last two decades in Chicago.

I'm not moving away from that, because I just love identifying a need, that has been a strength of mine, and why some of these projects have really flourished. It wasn't completely a unique idea to have a queer family-centered festival [like the Queer Fam Pride Jam], but it didn't really exist yet in Chicago. Not with someone that's a leader that knows how to really facilitate space, right? [It was the same] with Slo 'Mo, which certainly was not the first event to have a more R&B-centered, mid-tempo dance party, but what it did was really pull from things that we know are timeless. So people felt such a connection to that party [because it was] refocused on intimacy.

I find myself wanting to go back to having that intimacy because of how it allows for more intentionality and conversations and honesty. We're in such an era of fakeness between not knowing what's real and fake with AI and with mass consumption, and the even further bloating of corporate monopolies. We've got to get back to intimacy again. My hope is that with a writing project and creating that through my new project, Mother Lover, [I can] weave that in with my public event practice and get back to that kind of nostalgia.

Legacy building and legacy weaving are super important to me [as well], and that's why, if you're paying attention, you'll see that history is a part of most of my projects. Honoring the stories that are not always told, focus on women in music, Black women, and queer and trans women in music, because, hello? They are often the arbiters of the greatest culture, and those stories aren't told.

When you go to a party like Old Gold, and you have four women that DJ together, that are in the age ranges of 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, that have over 70 years of collective experience, there's [inherent] impact, because it's less about a trend, [and more] about them showing up and being their authentic selves and doing something that they really love. When you remove some of that other bullshit, oftentimes connected to patriarchy, it just [provides] a lot more room to be yourself and express yourself. That's why Old Gold, the party I am continuing, is really important to me.

There's an intersection of representation there that we shouldn't have to call out and say, oh, it's an all-women thing, because you don't have to share those identities to advocate for them.

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Winner of the 2022 Regional Theatre Tony Award, Court Theatre reimagines classic theatre to illuminate our current times. In residence at the University of Chicago and on Chicago's historic South Side, we engage our audiences with intimate and provocative experiences that inspire deeper exploration of the enduring questions that confront humanity and connect us as people.

Court Theatre defines classic theatre as texts from any culture, tradition, or era that resonate throughout time and speak to our present moment.

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