

Elyse Edelman

Director/Educator/Actress



"I didn't know she was directing a play about a girls' soccer team, and I just happened to have a soccer ball in my car because I play," says Lila Aryan, who photographed Elyse Edelman at the Renaissance Theatreworks stage. "We used it as a prop for some of the images. Magnificent woman." / Photo by Lila Aryan Photography

Milwaukee actress Elyse Edelman is doing her best to push her boundaries. In addition to her stage work, she's an emerging director and has been a core faculty member of the First Stage Young Company, a college-level training program for advanced high school actors, for five years.

The native Milwaukeean was a child actor "and admirer of all-things-Milwaukee theatre," she says. "I always tell the story of seeing Colleen Madden in 'The Syringa Tree' at Renaissance, playing many different roles, transforming in and out, and disappearing into them. I wanted to learn how to do that."

After acting school at the Guthrie Theatre, she acted across the country for 15 years. "I remember sitting in a bar with an actress in her 60s," Edelman says. "We'd been on the road for four months, and she said, 'I've never had a family — this has been my whole life.' I thought, 'I want a life like the actors I saw in Milwaukee — full-time actors who had families.'"

After the revelation, she moved back to MKE. "I'm really glad I did," she says. "I love having my family close by. I've worked as an actor in almost every professional theater in the state, so I have a rich artistic life and personal life."

This season, she'll perform in "The Anarchists" at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre and in two shows at Door County's Third Avenue Playworks — while continuing to teach at First Stage.

"I'm a curious person," she says of her acting roles. "If we can tell stories that are authentic and true, they're an opportunity to make us more compassionate and empathetic. About directing, I'm more choosy. I have to feel a personal connection."

2023-24 Season Notes

- In January, Edelman will direct "The Wolves," a 2016 hit by Sarah DeLappe, for Renaissance Theaterworks in partnership with First Stage's Young Company.

The added bonus of teaching at First Stage is the ability to cast age-appropriate girls for the critical roles, she says. The play centers on a high school girls' soccer team — every scene takes place as they're warming up for the next game, doing actual drills onstage.

"The way they warm up, it's like they're going to war," Edelman says. "To win is to be a warrior. You need a competitive spirit but you also have to support each other. That's what makes a warrior: support and competitiveness."

"It's not just about the ups and the downs of the sport. It's the ups and downs of their lives. For them, waking up every day and needing to live their lives as a young girl is like going to war."

In "The Wolves," the actors are played by nine 16-year-old girls from the Young Company.

"As far as I can tell, this is the first professional age-appropriate production of this play," she says. "I can't find another one where they've paid 16-year-olds to play 16-year-olds. Maybe part of the reason is because it's really mature material. But our girls are ready for it. They're hungry and talented. They've got the chops." MKE

Renaissance Theatreworks

Performances at 255 S. Water St.
r-t-w.com, (414) 278-0765,

"Witch," Oct. 22-Nov. 12

"The Wolves," Jan. 21-Feb. 11

"L'Appartement," March 24-April 14