



# The First Step

The First Stage Young Company serves as a feeder program for MKE area acting opportunities.

BY JOHN SCHNEIDER

**T**he First Stage Young Company plays a critical role — so to speak — in developing dramatic stage performers throughout the MKE area and beyond. The talented teenagers who join the troupe bridge the gap between young actors testing the waters and the focused performers who tread the boards at many of the dozens of theatre groups in the area.

The Young Company stages Shakespeare’s “Henry IV Part 1,” directed by Marcella “Marcy” Kearns,

Dec. 8-17 in the Milwaukee Youth Art Center’s intimate theatre-in-the-round Goodman Theatre. Adding an element of focus to the project is the fact that the drama is performed on a relatively bare stage, bereft of most props — allowing the cast to showcase their acting skills. The history play is the first of a trilogy about the lad who’ll become Henry V.

## Young Company Cast

“In many ways, the Young Company has taken up the mantle that was dropped when Milwaukee Shakespeare Theatre

closed [in 2008],” says Matt Daniels, the well-known Milwaukee Repertory Theatre actor who’s served as Young Company director since 2018 and as a teacher in the First Stage program since 2010. “There’s not a theatre organization in town that’s regularly doing classical work now, so it’s filled in a gap for some folks. These young people are skilled and talented and hungry — all the things you want in an artist.”

There are currently 50 high schoolers in the program, all chosen through auditions. They train on Saturday

mornings throughout the school year, with classes in acting, voice, movement and Shakespeare. The after-school rehearsals for those cast in productions follow the professional theatre model.

Together with Daniels, busy Wisconsin theatre artists Kearns and Elyse Edelman comprise the core faculty. Guest artists — all community professionals — team up for classes in skills like stage fighting, clowning and mask work.

Just as in conservatory programs, students advance through levels. “They come to us at different times in their lives,” Daniels explains. “Some have grown up at First Stage, taking summer theatre camp since they were 5 years old, hoping and waiting to be in Young Company and auditioning the moment they’re eligible.

“Some are high school seniors who audition because a friend in their school’s theatre program is a Young Company member. They’ll enter the program at the beginning level, regardless of their age. But it’s young people doing college and graduate level work with professional support from First Stage.”

Young Company presents two canonical plays every season, one of them by Shakespeare. There are also special offerings, such as a company commissioned play that will be workshopped with the playwright one season and given its world premiere the next. Only Young Company actors are eligible for these performance projects.

A special offering this year is a collaborative production with Renaissance Theaterworks of “The Wolves,” a 2016 Off-Broadway hit about a girls’ high school soccer team. The play has been widely produced throughout the country, but “as far as we know it’s never been produced with actual high schoolers playing the roles,” Daniels says, “and it will be here. The whole cast will be our girls.” Performances are in January and February, with Edelman directing.

## Teens Taking On Teens

“The heart of ‘Henry VI’ is a teenager,” Kearns explains of the Young Company season kickoff. “Prince Hal has two fathers: a fun father in Falstaff, whom he loves spending time with, and his actual father, King Henry IV.

“There’s a mixture of virtue and vice in each of those men,” Kearns continues. “Prince Hal has to figure out

for himself what it means to be a human, and someone who has to take a lot of responsibility because he’s meant to be the King of England. To me, it’s the story of a teen trying to create his own path, figure out his code, question what morality is, and find his own way to test himself so as not be afraid to be the king when he becomes so.”

In many ways, the drama reminds her of superhero origin stories, Kearns says. “Prince Hal was not a superhero, but he certainly became one of England’s most beloved kings. Out of all of Shakespeare’s plays, this one’s most like the origin story of a great hero.”

Kearns handles auditions in a unique manner. “I make available ahead of time a short scene or two that they can prepare,” she says. “They don’t have to memorize it but if they do, great. Then I coach them all in it in different variations during the audition period, which can last four hours. I also ask them to perform a monologue. I pulled four speeches from the play for them to choose among. I coached them there a bit, too. We played around a lot.”

And Young Company auditions keep an eye on the future, she says. “Casting isn’t always about who’s the best actor for the role,” Kearns says. “Sometimes it has to do with what an actor needs to grow. How will these artists evolve from this project?” MKE



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