



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Media Contacts:**

Cindy Moran, PR Consultant, [cmoran@firststage.org](mailto:cmoran@firststage.org) or (414) 405-6290

Jennifer Hubbartt, Marketing and Communications Director, [jhubbartt@firststage.org](mailto:jhubbartt@firststage.org) or (414) 630-9132

**Amplify – First Stage’s BIPOC Virtual Short Play Series  
continues with  
UNMUTED**

*-Featuring music performed in English with some Spanish lyrics-*

**Milwaukee, WI – April 22, 2021** – The second offering in First Stage’s new Amplify – BIPOC Virtual Short Plays Series will be UNMUTED, a lively new musical by First Stage Playwright in Residence **Alvaro Saar Rios**, with Music and Lyrics by composer **Deborah Wicks La Puma** and directed by **Anna Skidis Vargas**, Producing Artistic Director for Theatre Nuevo in St. Louis. This Amplify production explores the question: what happens when the substitute gym teacher is kicked out of the Zoom Room of a virtual gym class and the students take over? Performed in English with some Spanish lyrics, audiences will want to unmute their streaming devices to enjoy this fun and timely virtual play, to which we all can relate. *Recommended for families with young people ages 10+. Approximate running time is 15 minutes.*

First Stage developed this new series to offer virtual short plays created by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) playwrights that center on the young person’s point or view, amplifying the voices of these artists and young people throughout the Milwaukee community. The organization has had a long history of age-appropriate casting and of centering its work on the young person’s point of view. Understanding the power of connection that young people feel when they see themselves and their stories on stage, First Stage is excited to begin this series featuring newly commissioned work from BIPOC playwrights and directors.

UNMUTED streams **April 30 – May 30, 2021**. Each play in the Amplify series will be available on the First Stage YouTube channel. Audience members are encouraged to register to receive the link to each play prior to its premiere. While making a donation is not required for streaming access, all gifts received will help to support the artists involved in the Amplify series and First Stage’s commitment to building an inclusive community. To learn more and to register, please go to: <https://www.firststage.org/amplify>

“UNMUTED is a musical about what happens when the substitute teacher gets kicked out of the Zoom Room in a virtual gym class and students take over,” said Director **Anna Skidis Vargas**. “They play the game “SorD” (Secret or Dare) and learn about each other’s lives on the other side of the screen – their loud parents, love of tacos, Spanish class and all of the other things we miss about school in pre-pandemic life.”

Added playwright **Alvaro Saar Rios**, “This piece was inspired by my own son taking class online. Because we turned this into a musical, we wanted to highlight certain things – I don’t want to say make fun of – but more at least say, ‘We see you.’”

“The lyrics are in both Spanish and English, or Spanglish, as I grew up speaking in my household,” shared Composer/Musical Director **Deborah Wicks La Puma**. “I hope it’s something that families that are watching together feel is a reflection of living across multiple languages and cultures.”

Artistic Director **Jeff Frank** also commented: “I’m excited about the Amplify series, because we recognize that our young audiences connect more deeply to our productions when they see other young people on stage – when they see their lives represented in the stories we tell. Because we see the power in that connection, it is imperative that we continue to advance our efforts to ensure that as theater artists all of our programming is reflective of our community – through the stories we share and the programs we implement – and the teams we assemble to bring those stories and programs to life – and that we hear from and listen to the varied voices that make up this community.”

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**Alvaro Saar Rios (Playwright)** is a Playwright in Residence at First Stage. Other plays he has written for First Stage are last season’s ON THE WINGS OF A MARIPOSA, MOLE HILL STORIES and the award-winning LUCHADORA! His plays have been performed in New York City, Chicago, Hawaii, St. Louis, California, Arizona and all over Texas. He is a Resident Playwright at Chicago Dramatists, and in his past life, he drove tanks for the U.S. Army. Mr. Rios and his wife Michelle Lopez-Rios are the founders of The Royal Mexican Players. Alvaro has an MFA from Northwestern University and teaches playwriting at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. [www.alvarosaarrios.com](http://www.alvarosaarrios.com)

**Anna Skidis Vargas (Director)** is a director, actor and playmaker who subverts stereotypes through myth, spirituality and humor. She works primarily in devising and developing new work, with a focus on the stories of underrepresented groups. She is the Founding Artistic Director of Theatre Nuevo in Saint Louis, and has produced and directed five of their productions, including LUCHADORA! with Mustard Seed Theatre in collaboration with Theatre Nuevo, for which she was nominated for Outstanding Director of a Comedy and Outstanding Production of a Comedy by the St. Louis Theater Circle. As an actor and singer, Skidis Vargas has received two Circle Awards for Outstanding Performances, and has been nominated for three

others. She was also named Saint Louis' Best Female Vocalist by the *Riverfront Times* In 2014, and is a member of TCG's Rising Leaders of Color Cohort. Skidis holds a BA in Performance from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and is an MFA Directing Candidate at The University of Texas at Austin. While at UT, she has directed for their season subscription series, UT New Theatre and The Cohen New Works Festival. [www.skidisvargas.com](http://www.skidisvargas.com)

**Deborah Wicks La Puma (Composer/Musical Director)** is a composer, music director and orchestrator. She is one of the most produced Theatre for Young Audiences artists working today. With bestselling children's author Mo Willems she has created ELEPHANT AND PIGGIE'S "WE ARE IN A PLAY!"; NAKED MOLE RAT GETS DRESSED; THE ROCK EXPERIENCE and DON'T LET THE PIGEON DRIVE THE BUS: THE MUSICAL. Her many and diverse works with playwright Karen Zacarías include: ELLA ENCHANTED (Based on the book by Gail Carson Levine); OLIVÉRIO: A BRAZILIAN TWIST; FRIDA LIBRE; LOOKING FOR ROBERTO CLEMENTE and EINSTEIN IS A DUMMY. With playwright Adam Tobin she created SHE PERSISTED (based on the book by Chelsea Clinton), and the upcoming WHAT DO YOU DO WITH AN IDEA? (based on the book by Kobi Yamada). Her adult works include the lyric opera *Dakota Sky* and the Mexican folk musical PERDITA (based on Shakespeare's WINTER'S TALE) with Kathleen Cahill. She received her MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, her bachelor's degree from Stanford University and studied folk music with ethnomusicologist Alfredo López Mondragón. Her honors include the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award, an NEA New American Works Grant, two Parents' Choice Awards and a Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Musical Adaptation. A proud Mexican-American and "Navy brat" who grew up in Brazil, Portugal and California, La Puma is a member of TYA USA/ASSITEJ, ASCAP and The Dramatists Guild. Mother to three daughters and Mimi the Cat, La Puma lives in Southern California with her PR agent and loving husband, Chris. [www.crunchynotes.com](http://www.crunchynotes.com)

**Jeff Schaetzke (Assistant Musical Director/Director of Artistic Operations)** has a long history at First Stage as a director, teacher, music director and actor, dating back to playing Romeo in 1996. Most recently, Jeff directed ELF – The Musical, the music for Roald Dahl's MATILDA The Musical and BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER THE MUSICAL. Other First Stage favorites include THE MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF EDWARD TULANE, SPOOKLEY THE SQUARE PUMPKIN THE MUSICAL, LOVABYE DRAGON, RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL, ELLA ENCHANTED; BIG NATE: THE MUSICAL; BIG FISH (having also appeared as Edward Bloom); BIG, THE MUSICAL and many others. A lifelong Milwaukeean, Jeff has enjoyed working with many Milwaukee theaters, including playing Father in Skylight Music Theatre's production of VIOLET, and directing music for the Milwaukee Rep, Skylight Music Theatre, Carroll University, UWM and Marquette University. Other credits: Milwaukee Chamber Theatre's THE DALY NEWS, two seasons at American Players Theatre and a 22-year relationship at Dominican High School. Jeff is a 2014 inductee into the Wisconsin Theatre Directors Hall of Fame and a four-time Outstanding Musical Award Winner at the Overture Center's TOMMY/JERRY Awards. He is a proud graduate of North Central College and the Professional Theatre Training Program at UW-Milwaukee.

**Jeff Frank (Artistic Director)** is recognized as one of the top directors in the field with an expertise in developing new work for theater for young audiences. He holds a BFA in Theater from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and an MFA in Child Drama from the University of Utah. Having served as First Stage's Education and Academy Director from 1996 – 2003 and as First Stage's Artistic Director since February 2003, Jeff remains committed to the power of theater to transform lives and is forever thankful to call First Stage home.

The cast of UNMUTED features Young Performers: **Ailie Snyder** (Milwaukee); **Noel Rubalcava** (Milwaukee); **Ariel Nelson** (Milwaukee); **Reese Bell** (Cedarburg); **Dayanara Sanchez** (New Berlin); **Annie Sturtz** (Waukesha); **Ryon Davis** (Milwaukee) and **Naima Gaines** (Milwaukee).

The Artistic Staff for UNMUTED Includes: **Anna Skidis Vargas** (Director); **Deborah Wicks La Puma** (Composer/Musical Director); **Jeff Schaetzke** (Assistant Musical Director), **Coltyn Giltner** (Video Crew) and **Melissa L. Wanke**, Member of Actors' Equity Association, (Stage Manager).

For the UNMUTED Companion Enrichment Guide, please visit:

[https://www.firststage.org/Documents/First Stage PDFs/2020-2021 season/Unmuted\\_EnrichmentGuide.pdf](https://www.firststage.org/Documents/First Stage PDFs/2020-2021 season/Unmuted_EnrichmentGuide.pdf)

For visuals for UNMUTED including headshots, show logo and trailer, please visit:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12kCVx\\_ZdVNjp4PK3xqBp2DRow77VtdAN?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12kCVx_ZdVNjp4PK3xqBp2DRow77VtdAN?usp=sharing)

The schedule for **Amplify – First Stage's BIPOC Virtual Short Play Series** is:

### **UNMUTED**

By [Alvaro Saar Rios](#)

Music and Lyrics by [Deborah Wicks La Puma](#)

Directed by [Anna Skidis Vargas](#)

**Streaming April 30 – May 30, 2021**

**Premieres at 7 p.m. on Friday, April 30**

**Description:** When the substitute gym teacher is kicked out of the Zoom Room of a virtual gym class, the students take over! As the group starts a game of "SorD" (Secret or Dare), they discover more about each other's lives on the other side of the screen – their frustrations with online school, their love for tacos on Tuesdays and, most importantly, what they miss. Performed in English with some Spanish lyrics, unmute your streaming device for this lively new musical, to which we all can relate. *Recommended for families with young people ages 10+.*

**Talkback:** An extended talkback will stream on the First Stage Facebook page on **Friday, April 30 at 7:30 p.m.** following the premiere of UNMUTED. The talkback will be facilitated by Digital Marketing & Content Manager **Antonio L. Davis, Jr.** and will feature playwright **Alvaro Saar Rios**, director **Anna Skidis Vargas** and Composer /Musical Director **Deborah Wicks La Puma**.

## **COPPER HORNS IN WATER**

By [Ty Defoe](#)

Directed by *Johamy Morales*

**Streaming now – May 16, 2021**

Link posted here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbetctxRMtw&t=7s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbetctxRMtw&t=7s)

**Description:** North is a curious underwater creature who has earned their Copper Horns, a coming-of-age ritual that gives these young creatures power under water. North will soon learn the importance of their horns when they need to summon their strength – and with the collective power of their friends – to save the day. Based on Anishinaabe storytelling tradition, tune in as students from Indian Community School perform this fun-filled story for the entire family. *Recommended for families with young people ages 8+.*

### ***Title To Be Announced***

By [Nikkole Salter](#)

Directed by *Samantha Montgomery*

**Streaming Fall 2021** (Please note: this virtual play was originally scheduled for May 20 – June 21, 2021. Stay tuned for new streaming dates in Fall 2021, as part of the 2021/22 season’s Amplify Series.)

For any additional questions, please call: **(414) 267-2961**.

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### **About First Stage**

First Stage is one of the nation’s leading theaters for young people and families. First Stage touches hearts, engages minds and transforms lives by creating extraordinary theater experiences through professional theater productions that inspire, enlighten and entertain. Its Theater Academy, the nation’s largest high-impact theater training program for young people, fosters life skills through stage skills and serves nearly 2,000 students each year. As Wisconsin’s leader in arts-integrated education in schools, First Stage’s dynamic Theater in Education programs promote literacy, character building and experiential learning throughout the curriculum, serving over 20,000 students each year. First Stage was selected to participate in the Partners in Education program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2012) and was the recipient of the *Milwaukee Business Journal’s* Eureka Award, recognizing creativity and innovation in business, education and the arts for its Next Steps program for students on the autism spectrum (2013, 2015). First Stage is a member of TYA/USA, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the Wisconsin Alliance for Arts Education, Milwaukee Arts Partners and is a cornerstone member of the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF). [www.firststage.org](http://www.firststage.org)