Welcome to American Blues Theater’s 32nd season “The Beat Goes On”. We proudly celebrate the 16th anniversary of this holiday tradition. We’ve delighted over 50,000 patrons throughout the years and featured the work of 29 Ensemble members and Artistic Affiliates. One cast member, John Mohrlein (Mr. Potter / Clarence), has evolved with this production since the first curtain. In 16 years, he has never missed a performance. Please knock on wood immediately upon reading.

This story is a staple of our mission: American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. During 2002 and 2003, our Ensemble and former Artistic Director, Damon Kiely, presented staged-readings of It’s a Wonderful Life. In 2004, we expanded the event to a fully-staged production of Joe Landry’s adaptation, directed by Ensemble member Marty Higginbotham. In the years that followed, Higginbotham created a live-radio experience for audience members and adapted a new version with our Ensemble. Dramaturgical research and attention to detail were paramount to our adaptations. Higginbotham’s directorial elements included adding audio grams, lobby refreshments of cookies and milk, dramatized scenes from Capra’s film, a pre-show, and singing holiday carols. In our present iteration, you can also enjoy “vintage” video, the “Soldier Spotlight” which has honored nearly 400 military personnel, expanded scenes, and a quiz show for the live audience.

This story reminds us of the fragility of life. Frank Capra’s lines – “Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” – resonates throughout the year. During the holidays, it becomes a poignant reminder as we gather with our loved ones.

Your gracious spirits and open hearts are equally important to this Chicago tradition. Your presence is a gift to the Blues family. We welcome you—our home is yours.

- Gwendolyn Whiteside

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IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!

Directed by Gwendolyn Whiteside*
Music directed by Michael Mahler*

Scenic Design ................................................................. Grant Sabin*, U.S.A.
Lighting Design ............................................................. Katy Peterson
Costume Design ........................................................... Christopher J. Neville*
Original Score ............................................................. Austin Cook*
Jingle Composer ........................................................... Michael Mahler*
Properties Design ......................................................... Elyse Dolan*
Projection Associate ..................................................... Paul Deziel*
Stage Management ....................................................... Kathryn Lochert*^

Featuring
Dara Cameron*^, Ian Paul Custer*^, Shawn J. Goudie*, James Joseph*, Zach Kenney*^, Michael Mahler*^, John Mohrlein*^, Camille Robinson*^, and Gwendolyn Whiteside*

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater
^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers

NOVEMBER 18, 2017 – JANUARY 6, 2018 (previews Nov 16 & 17)

More than 50,000 patrons have enjoyed our holiday classic since 2002. The American Blues Theater Ensemble performed “It’s a Wonderful Life” as a radio play at various Chicago venues and events, including American Theatre Company, Theater on the Lake, Mrs. Murphy’s Bistro, Logan Square (2002-2008); Victory Gardens Biograph Theater (2009-2012); Greenhouse Theater Center (2013-2016); Stage 773 (2017+).

American Blues Theater
4809 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 221, Chicago, IL 60640
Phone: (773) 654-3103  Box office: (773) 327-5252  AmericanBluesTheater.com

American Blues Theater is a constituent of the Theatre Communications Group, Inc – the national organization for nonprofit professional theaters, the League of Chicago Theaters, Arts Alliance Illinois, and Lakeview Chamber of Commerce.

American Blues Theater operates under agreements between Producers’ Association of Chicago Area Theatres, Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers, Stage Directors & Choreographers Society, and United Scenic Artists of America, Local 829 – AFL-CIO.
CAST

Violet .......................................................................................................................... Dara Cameron*^
Harry ......................................................................................................................... Ian Paul Custer*^
Foley ......................................................................................................................... Shawn J. Goudie*^
Uncle Billy ............................................................................................................... James Joseph*
George Bailey ....................................................................................................... Zach Kenney*^
Announcer / Pianist ................................................................................................. Michael Mahler*^
Clarence / Mr. Potter .............................................................................................. John Mohrlein*^
Mary Bailey (Dec 20-Jan 6) .................................................................................. Camille Robinson*^
Mary Bailey (Nov 16-Dec 17) ................................................................................ Gwendolyn Whiteside*

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater
^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers

As a courtesy to the actors and your fellow patrons, please turn off your phone before the performance. The taking of photographs and the use of any type of recording device are not allowed in the theater during the performance and is a violation of state and federal copyright laws. Digital media will be deleted and tape or film will be confiscated.

SETTING

1944. A radio broadcast from the WABT Studio on Belmont Avenue in Chicago.

The performance runs 90 minutes without an intermission.

PRODUCTION STAFF

Production Manager ............................................................................................... Samantha R. Dzirko
Sound Engineer ...................................................................................................... Keegan Bradac
Assistant Sound Engineer ................................................................................... Warren Levon*
House Manager ..................................................................................................... Lindsay Rowley
Assistant House Manager ..................................................................................... Rachel Borgo
Assistant Director ................................................................................................. Elyse Dolan*
Production Assistant ......................................................................................... Bronte DeShong
Technical Director ............................................................................................... Michael Trudeau*
Master Electrician .............................................................................................. Rachel Lake
Scenic Painter ....................................................................................................... Eileen Rozycki
American Blues Theater believes it is an honor and duty to serve our community. We raise awareness of other non-profit organizations' great causes through creative collaborations. We proudly offer complimentary tickets to the USO, U.S. Dept. of Veteran Affairs, and Misericordia. We honor military personnel during the performance during our “Soldier Spotlight.” We continue our “Pink Previews” to donate proceeds to The Lynn Sage Foundation for breast cancer research. To enrich your experience, visit AmericanBluesTheater.com.

**SEASON SUPPORTERS**


**SPECIAL THANKS**

The biggest Hoosier fans, Cathy Taylor Public Relations, Paula Conrad, Marty Higginbotham, The Saints, X-Man, and the staff of Stage 773.

Video production services provided by The Stage Channel. Our ushers are provided by the Saints—Volunteers for the Performing Arts. For more information visit Saintschicago.org or call 773-529-5510.

**BIOGRAPHIES**

**DARA CAMERON**

(Violet) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. She's so happy to be back with her American Blues family for her fifth *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago*! Other favorite credits include “Audrey” in *Little Shop of Horrors* (American Blues Theater); “Jovie” in *Elf, October Sky, Sister Act, City of Angels, Hero, The Wizard of Oz, Cinderella, Fiddler on the Roof,* and *Little Women* (Marriott Theatre); *Old Jews Telling Jokes* (Off-Broadway and at the Royal George); “Wednesday” in *The Addams Family* (Mercury Theatre); *Sunset Boulevard, Seussical, Thoroughly Modern Millie,* and *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* (Drury Lane). She is a proud member of Actors’ Equity and a graduate of Northwestern University. As always, she’s delighted to share the stage with her husband, Michael Mahler, and even more delighted that this year they get to share their favorite holiday tradition with their son-to-be, due to arrive in March.

**IAN PAUL CUSTER**

(Harry) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. Recent American Blues credits: *The Columnist* (David Halberstam, Jeff Nomination for Best Production – Midsize), *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*
**BIOGRAPHIES cont.**

*Live in Chicago!* (Jeff Nomination for Best Ensemble and Best Production – Midsize), *Little Shop of Horrors* (“Orin Skrivello”, Jeff Nomination for Best Production of a Musical – Midsize), and *Yankee Tavern.*


Love to Shannon, my friends, and my family for all the support.

**SHAWN J. GOUDIE (Foley)** is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. He is excited to return for his 9th season of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* It is a joy for him to share the magic of old time radio with so many wonderful folks year after year. He would like to thank his amazing wife, their endlessly curious children, and his loving parents.

**JAMES JOSEPH (Uncle Billy)** is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. He returns for his eighth season of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* Also at American Blues he appeared in *Tobacco Road*, performed voiceovers for *Hank Williams: Lost Highway* and *American Myth*, and has written for the *Ripped* festival. He has performed on Chicago stages for twenty years, including at Steppenwolf Theatre, Northlight Theatre, Victory Gardens Theater, and TimeLine Theatre. He is your audio guide for the permanent *Chicago Authored* exhibition at the Chicago History Museum, and was nominated for a Non-Equity Jeff Award (Supporting Actor) for his role in *Faith Healer* with UMA Productions.

**ZACH KENNEY** (*George Bailey*) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. He is thrilled to return as “George”, and to return to *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* for a third time. Previous work with American Blues also includes *Waiting for Lefty*, directed by Kimberly Senior. Chicago credits include: *Hit the Wall* (The Inconvenience); *Hair* (American Theater Company); *The March* (u/s, Steppenwolf Theatre); *Chicago Boys* (Goodman Theatre New Stages); *The Gospel According to James* (Victory Gardens Theater); and *The Farnsworth Invention* and *Not Enough Air* (TimeLine Theatre). Regional: *The Great Gatsby*, *Red*, *Mary's Wedding* (opposite Gwendolyn Whiteside), and *Who Am I This Time?* (Indiana Rep); *A Little Night Music* (u/s) and *1776* (Asolo Rep); and *An Immaculate Misconception* (Eureka Theatre Co.). Television/film: *Chicago Fire*, *LifeSteps…*, and *Schizo Cool*. A San Francisco native, Zach trained at A.C.T. ’s Young Conservatory (originating the title role in Horton Foote’s *The Actor* in 2002) before attending The Theatre School at DePaul University. Zach resides in Los Angeles and thanks Alli, GTG, and this exceptional company.

**MICHAEL MAHLER** (*Announcer/Pianist*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He happily returns for a seventh season in Bedford Falls. American Blues credits include *Little Shop of Horrors*,
COMING IN 2018!

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AMERICAN BLUES THEATER
Side Man, and Hank Williams: Lost Highway. Other Chicagoland credits include: Honeymoon in Vegas, City of Angels, and The 25th Annual… Spelling Bee (Marriott Theatre); The March (Steppenwolf Theatre); Working (Broadway in Chicago); and The Fox on the Fairway, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels (Jeff nomination), and The Producers (Theatre at the Center). Michael is the Jeff award-winning composer/lyricist of Diary of a Wimpy Kid, October Sky, The Man who Murdered Sherlock Holmes, Wonderland: Alice’s Rock & Roll Adventure, and Hero. He also contributed additional lyrics to the new Broadway production of Miss Saigon. Up next, Michael will music direct and appear in Blues’ production of Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story. He is proud to share the stage with his wife, Dara Cameron, who is full of the joy of the season (and also a baby).

JOHN MOHRLEIN (Clarence/Mr. Potter) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. 16 years as “Clarence/Mr. Potter”, and he loves getting to revisit and reinvent these characters year after year. At American Blues, he’s appeared in Half of Plenty, It’s a Wonderful Life, A View from the Bridge, Strictly Dishonorable, American Dead, The Hairy Ape, A Lie of the Mind, Endgame, American Buffalo, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Threepenny Opera, A Stone Carver (Jeff nomination for Best Actor, After Dark Award for Outstanding Performance), and directed Catch-22. Other credits: The Glass House at the Art Institute of Chicago; nine productions at Goodman Theatre; and Cripple of Inishmaan, Heart of a Dog, and Murder of Cardinal Tosca at Northlight Theatre. His extensive television and film work includes Golden Boy, Good Night Sweet Wife, Dillinger, Killing Floor, Early Edition, Crime Story (recurring role), Untouchables, Devil’s Dominoes, Stranger Than Fiction, No Place to be Somebody, Hellicab, Hero, and Cold Justice. Now he’s developing “Star Crossed Lovers”, “Pope Frank in Venice”, while continuing to install his art works.

CAMILLE ROBINSON (Mary Bailey, Dec. 20 – Jan. 6) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. She is thrilled to be returning to this lovely, timeless show! She owes everything to her family for she would be nothing without their love and support. Recent Chicago theater credits include: Lizzie (Firebrand Theatre), Big River (Theatre at the Center), Jesus Christ Superstar (Paramount Theatre), A Wonder in My Soul (Victory Gardens Theater), Wonderful Town (Goodman Theatre), and Little Shop of Horrors (American Blues Theater). Recent TV/Film credits include: Chicago Med and Chicago PD (NBC). Represented by Gray Talent Group.

GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE (Mary Bailey, Nov. 16 – Dec. 17) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and has served as Artistic Director since 2010. Under her leadership, American Blues has nearly doubled the size of its Ensemble, added 29 Artistic Affiliates, and diversified its base of artists. She created the nationally-recognized annual Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development for new work, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and created the free arts education program The Lincoln Project for Chicago Public Schools which serves 3,000 students annually. She led American Blues through its 2009 rebirth and built the operational budget from zero to $1 million+ in seven years. Whiteside served numerous panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and sat on the national Board of Directors for Network of Ensemble Theaters.
Currently she sits on the Board of Directors for The League of Chicago Theaters. She’s a graduate of Northwestern University (cum laude), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA), and a Kellogg Executive Scholar in Nonprofit management (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University). She was nominated for “Chicagoman of the Year” in Chicago Magazine and named in Newcity’s annual Players list numerous times. In seven years, eight American Blues’ productions won or were nominated for production by the Joseph Jefferson Award committee. She’s received 13 Joseph Jefferson Awards, Citations, and nominations as an actress and Artistic Director. Her favorite performances include Jeff Award for Solo Performance (Grounded) and 7 years as “Mary Bailey” (It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!). She’s the recipient of two (2) After Dark Awards and numerous Broadway World Chicago Awards and nominations. She directs the Joseph Jefferson Award nominated annual holiday production, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!

GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE (Artistic Director / Director) See cast.

MICHAEL MAHLER (Music Director / Jingle Composer) See cast.

AUSTIN COOK (Score Composer) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He is an award-winning music director, musician, actor and producer currently residing in Brooklyn, NY. He has recently joined the Los Angeles production of Hamilton as the Music Associate. Recent credits: Pre-Broadway World Premiere War Paint (Pianist), 1st/4th National Tour Million Dollar Quartet (Music Director/ Music Supervisor), Sondheim on Sondheim (Music Director/Pianist – Jeff Award Music Direction), Ain’t Misbehavin’ (Pianist – Jeff Award Artistic Specialization), Putting It Together (Music Director/Pianist – Jeff Award Nominee), Some Enchanted Evening (Music Director/Pianist – Jeff Award Music Direction). Ring of Fire (Piano, Guitar, Dobro, Bass), and Hank Williams: Lost Highway (Hoss), Little Shop of Horrors (Music Director – Jeff Award Nominee). Chicago Theater credits include: Goodman Theatre, Writers Theatre, Mercury Theater, Theatre at the Center, Porchlight Music Theatre, American Blues Theater, American Theater Company, Second City. Music Producer credits: Billy Woodward, John Michael Presney, Yuleberry’s and Friends. Austin’s most recently produced album “The Beast in Me” won the Independent Music Award for Best Roots EP and is featured on PBS nationally in Sun Studio Sessions. www.austinryancook.com

GRANT SABIN (Scenic Design) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. A native of rural Illinois, Grant blends his rural roots with urban art. He’s a recipient of the 2015 Michael Maggio Emerging Designer Award. He’s a graduate of Columbia College with a BFA in theatre design where he was awarded the 2005 Michael Merritt student scholarship for collaboration in theatre design. He is known throughout Chicago for his keen eye in capturing atmospheric detail and his ability to design “impressively executed sets” on a storefront-theater budget. His designs have been seen at Northlight Theatre, Victory Gardens Theater, Steppenwolf Theatre, Next Theatre, The Royal George, Overture Center WI, Theatre Wit, Gallagher Bluedorn IA, American Blues Theater, American Theater Company, Christina Isabelle Dance, The Seldoms Dance, and A Red Orchid. He was nominated for a Joseph Jefferson Award for his design of American Blues’ production of Yankee Tavern, A Red Orchid’s production of The Sea Horse, and Dog & Pony’s production of Mr. Marmalade. He was recently named one of the Top 50 Players in Chicago Theatre by Newcity Magazine. Grant is currently a part-time faculty member at Columbia College.
CHRISTOPHER J. NEVILLE (Costume Design) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He is elated to be back this holiday. Previous Blues costume designs include Hank Williams: Lost Highway (assistant), The Rainmaker, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago, Looking Over The President’s Shoulder, and Dutchman/TRANSit. Christopher stitched and assistant designed at Victory Gardens Theater, Lookingglass Theatre Company, Chicago Opera Theater, Theatre at the Center, and Signal Ensemble Theatre. Along with balancing design work, Christopher teaches yoga across the Chicagoland area. He trained at Peninsula Players Theatre as a production intern and received his BFA in Theatre Design & Technology from Oakland University in Rochester, MI. www.cjnevilledesigns.com

KATY PETERSON (Lighting Design) is thrilled to design lights for It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! with American Blues again. Past designs have been seen at the Chopin Theatre, the Athenaeum, The Building Stage, Prop Theatre, Viaduct, Stage Left, The Side Project, Profiles, Theatre at the Center (Indiana), The State Theatre, Lab Theatre (Texas), among others. Favorite shows include nine years of It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago with American Blues Theater Ensemble; Nebraska with BOTC; and Playing With Fire, The Glorious Ones, and I Am My Own Wife (Jeff nomination) with BoHo Theatre. Katy spent seven seasons in Lighting/Production Design for The Oprah Winfrey Show, and now resides in on a farm in Ohio with her dogs and loving husband Ben, where she is pursuing a masters in Architecture at OSU.

ELYSE DOLAN (Assistant Director and Properties Design) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater where she is also the Assistant Producer. At Blues she has directed numerous short plays in past Ripped Festivals; assisted Jonathan Berry on Little Shop of Horrors; assisted Jess McLeod and Kimberly Senior on Blue Ink staged readings; and assisted Ed Blatchford on The Rainmaker. Her directing work has been seen across Chicago at The New Colony, Broken Nose Theatre, Prop Thtr, Babes with Blades, Pride Films & Plays, Gorilla Tango Theatre, Three Cat Productions, and more. She has served as Assistant Director on productions at The New Colony, Raven Theatre, Oracle Theatre, 16th Street Theater, and Redtwist Theatre. Elyse holds a B.A. in Theater and English Literature from Denison University.

KATHRYN LOCHERT (Stage Manager) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. She returns for her fourth season as stage manager for It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! and couldn’t be happier to reunite with her Blues family for another holiday season. Kathryn’s previous American Blues Theater credits include Ripped: The Living Newspaper Festival; The Wind and the Breeze (staged reading); The Rainmaker; Yankee Tavern; Hank Williams: Lost Highway (remount and original production); and American Myth. Other Chicago credits include The Happiest Song Plays Last; Teddy Ferrara; Charles’ Dickens’ A Christmas Carol (Goodman Theatre); and Chicago Shakespeare in the Parks: The Taming of the Shrew (Chicago Shakespeare Theater). Kathryn received her BFA in Stage Management from the University of Southern California. She is a proud member of AEA. She sends love to her hubby Christopher!

KEEGAN BRADAC (Sound Engineer) is excited to be returning to It’s a Wonderful Life for his second year. He is a Chicago-based sound designer and engineer, with a B.A. from Columbia College in Audio Arts & Acoustics. Recent design credits include Bullets Over Broadway (NightBlue); All Shook Up (Casting Auction); and The Scottsboro Boys, Marry Me a Little, and Little Me (Porchlight Music Theatre). His Sound Engineer credits include Fun Home (Victory Gardens Theater); Little Fish (Kokandy Productions); Thrones! The Musical Parody (Apollo Theater); and In the
Heights, Dreamgirls, Far From Heaven, Ain’t Misbehavin’, Applause, Chess, and The Rink (Porchlight Music Theatre).

SHAWN GOUDIE (Foley Design) See cast.

PAUL DEZIEL (Projection Associate) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. He works on It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! each year. He freelances as a projection designer throughout Chicago, Washington D.C., and their respective communities. Selected credits include: Beauty’s Daughter (American Blues Theater); United Flight 232 (The House Theatre); Churchill and The Unfortunates (SoloChicago); Flying V Fights: The Secret of the Unknown World (Flying V Theatre); The Glass Menagerie (The Hypocrites); Merge and Kin Folk (The New Colony); Mike Mother and Redletter (The Neo-Futurists); The 39 Steps (Theatre at the Center); Mutt (Stage Left & Red Tape Theatre); and Twisted Melodies (Congo Square Theatre Company). Upcoming Projects: Sotto Voce (Theater J). Paul holds a B.A. in Theatre from Columbia College Chicago and is currently an MFA candidate for Projection Design at the University of Maryland. Outside of theatre, Paul enjoys tabletop gaming and reading “Calvin & Hobbes”. For more info on his designs, visit pauldeziel.com

MICHAEL TRUDEAU (Technical Director) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. Michael is thrilled to be working with American Blues again this season. Recent Chicago credits include technical director for Emergent Theatre, Sideshow Theatre Company, Route 66 Theatre, American Theater Company, and Livewire Theatre Company. He has also served as master electrician for Shattered Globe Theatre, and Theatre at the Center as well as spot operator for Mary Poppins and Miss Saigon with Paramount Theatre in Aurora, IL. During the summer months, he is the Master Electrician at Peninsula Players Theater in Fish Creek, WI. http://mtrudeau23.wix.com/mtrudeaudesigns

SAMANTHA R. DZIRKO (Production Manager) is a Chicago-based Production Manager who is excited to be working with American Blues Theater. Other Production Management credits include working with: The Hypocrites (Chicago, IL), Williamstown Theatre Festival (Massachusetts), and Actors Theatre of Louisville (Kentucky). Samantha graduated with a B.A. in Theatre from the University of Scranton (Pennsylvania).

RACHEL LAKE (Assistant Lighting Designer and Master Electrician) thrilled to be returning to American Blues Theater for It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! Recent Design works include: Yasmina’s Necklace (Goodman Theatre (Assistant Lighting Designer)); The Last Days of Judas Iscariot (Eclectic Full Contact Theatre); Gideon’s Knot (Eclectic Full Contact Theatre); Lady X: The Musical (Hell in a Handbag); and Deep in the Heart of Tuna (New American Folk Theatre). Recent Master Electrician credits include: This Wonderful Life (American Blues Theater); The Last Days of Judas Iscariot (University of Illinois in Chicago); The Heavens Are Hung in Black (Shattered Globe Theatre); Beauty’s Daughter (American Blues Theater); and Cabaret (Theatre at the Center (Assistant Master Electrician)). She is a company member of Eclectic Full Contact Theatre, a staff member at The Edge Theater, and an alumnus of West Virginia University.
ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theater Wing’s prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. American Blues Theater follows three guiding values both on and off its stages – to be accessible, responsible, and true.

Our diverse and multi-generational artists have established the second oldest professional Equity Ensemble theater in Chicago. Our 36-member Ensemble has nearly 600 combined years of collaboration on stage. As of today, our theater and artists received 197 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 35 Black Theater Alliance Awards. Our artists are honored with Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades.

American Blues Theater is committed to developing the classic plays and musicals of tomorrow. Our new work development consists of a variety of programs – including world and regional premieres, the Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint commissions, and Ripped: the Living Newspaper Festival of new short-plays. More than half of our mainstage productions are world and Chicago premieres.

HISTORY

DEFINITION OF “ENSEMBLE”
An Ensemble theater is a group of individuals dedicated to collaborative creation and committed to consistently working together over years to develop a distinctive body of work and practices. Ensemble members, both artists and administrators, are empowered to help shape their theater’s artistic direction and organizational structure.

HISTORY

BUILT BY THE AMERICAN BLUES FAMILY
American Blues Theater was founded in July 1985 by a director, playwright, designer, and actor. The company dedicated itself to new and classic American plays. Richard Christiansen of the Chicago Tribune cited American Blues in his editorial “Chicago Theater Forges New Standards of Glory.” In August of 1993, the company leased a warehouse on Byron and Lincoln. In 38 days, James Leaming led a community-based 90+ volunteer crew to transform the space into an intimate 134-seat theater. From 1994-1997, the Ensemble was lauded with numerous Joseph Jefferson Awards and After Dark Awards.

LEADERSHIP FROM OUTSIDE THE ENSEMBLE
From 1997-2009, the company was led by Artistic Directors from outside of the Ensemble. Under the leadership of Brian Russell and Damon Kiely (’97-’07), the theater’s name changed to American Theater Company (ATC), the mission statement was revised, and the business expanded greatly. In 2008, under new management, the Ensemble theater practice was dismantled. After 18 months of talks with the new management, all four Founders and every Ensemble member prior to 2008 chose to leave the ATC organization in March 2009 citing “major administrative and artistic differences.”
BLUE SKIES AHEAD
The Ensemble reformed under its original name American Blues Theater. Founding Board members reconstituted the Board, giving tremendous support and guidance. Ensemble member Gwendolyn Whiteside became the Artistic Director. Whiteside ushered in the annual Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and adapted the arts education program The Lincoln Project for Chicago Public Schools that serves 3,000 students annually.

“One of our favorites in Chicago!” – Dean Richards, WGN
“Ensemble founded one of Chicago’s most venerable off-loop theaters.” – Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune

ENSEMBLE - FOUNDED IN 1985

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Ed Blatchford
Matthew Brumlow
Manny Buckley
Kate Buddeke
Sarah Burnham
Dara Cameron
Casey Campbell
Darren Canady
Brian Claggett
Rick Cleveland
Dennis Cockrum
Austin Cook

Laura Coover
Ian Paul Custer
Lauri Dahl
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This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, and the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.