ARTISTIC DIRECTOR’S NOTE

Welcome to American Blues Theater’s Season 33 “Home Sweet Home”. We proudly present the Chicago premiere of James Lecesne’s *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, directed by Kurt Johns, and starring Ensemble member Joe Foust.

The story revolves around the disappearance of a 14-year-old boy who dared to be different and the small New Jersey town that will never be the same without him. You’ll meet a tough detective, a withdrawn teenage girl, a brusque yet gentle hairdresser, and many other intriguing characters as they join forces to solve a mystery. The script unfolds like a true-crime police procedural—yet the narrative never loses its heart by way of the optimistic and authentic boy, Leonard Pelkey. You’ll find yourself uplifted and grateful for unique souls like his in this world.

Likewise, we’re thankful for James Lecesne who is a writer, actor, and activist. He is the author of *Absolute Brightness*, the book that inspired this critically-acclaimed play. In addition, Chicago audiences may have caught the world premiere musical *Trevor* at Writers Theater in 2017. It was inspired by Lecesne’s film *Trevor* which received an Academy Award for best short film. Lecesne cofounded The Trevor Project, a 24-hour suicide-prevention hotline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning teens.

For many in the LGBTQ community and other marginalized groups, discrimination and hate crimes are common occurrences. In November 2018, the FBI and Justice Department released alarming numbers: there were 7,175 reported hate crimes in 2017—a 17% increase from 2016—and the highest number of hate crimes in a decade. Even more disturbing is they acknowledge this data is underreported as many people assaulted, bullied, or harmed do not ever report abuses to authorities.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

May the story of Leonard Pelkey inspire you—accept, protect, love.

—Gwendolyn Whiteside

Playwright James Lecesne

Photo credit by Shervin Lainez
American Blues Theater

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THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY

by James Lecesne
directed by Kurt Johns

Scenic Design............................................................................................................ Grant Sabin*, USA
Lighting Design....................................................................................................... Jared Gooding*
Costume Design .................................................................................................. Travis Bihn
Composer & Sound Design ................................................................................... Eric Backus*
Projections Design ............................................................................................... G. “Max” Maxin IV
Properties Design .................................................................................................. Mary O’Dowd
Production Stage Manager .................................................................................... Shandee Vaughan*^

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater
^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association

APRIL 4–27, 2019 (previews Mar 29–Apr 3)


American Blues Theater
4809 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 221, Chicago, IL 60640
Phone: (773) 654-3103        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.
COMMUNITY SERVICE FOR ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS

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 partner with Northwestern University’s The Family Institute, Chicago Public Schools, The Trevor Project, and Center on Halsted. We continue our “Pediatric Previews” that donate proceeds of preview performances to St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital. To enrich your experience, visit AmericanBluesTheater.com.

SEASON SUPPORTERS


**BIOGRAPHIES**

**JOE FOUST** *(Solo Performer)* is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater, where he has appeared in *Side Man* and choreographed many fights. Chicago acting credits include *Measure for Measure, A Christmas Carol, The Beard of Avon* (Goodman Theatre); *What the Butler Saw, Endgame* (Court Theatre); *Mother Courage and Her Children* (Steppenwolf Theatre); *Kabuki Medea* (Wisdom Bridge Theatre); *The Seagull, Major Barbara* (Remy Bumpco Theatre Company); *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (Next Theatre); *Spin, Santaland Diaries, The Watson Intelligence* (Theater Wit); *All Childish Things, Women in Jeopardy, Jeeves at Sea, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Laughter on the 23rd Floor, Unnecessary Farce, Making God Laugh, The Woman in Black* (First Folio Theatre); fourteen productions with Chicago Shakespeare Theater, where favorites include *The Winter’s Tale, Hamlet, Timon of Athens, Twelfth Night, and Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*; and three seasons with Oak Park Festival Theatre. Regional credits include playing “Hamlet” at Nevermore Theatre; *The 39 Steps, Around the World in 80 Days* (Cleveland Play House); five productions with Milwaukee Shakespeare; *Kabuki Achilles* (People’s Light and Theatre Company); *The Winter’s Tale* (Missouri Rep); *Romeo and Juliet* (River Styx, London); and nineteen seasons acting, writing and directing with Peninsula Players. Joe is a founding member of Defiant Theatre, where credits include directing and co-writing *Action Movie: The Play* and *Ubu Raw*. TV and film credits include *Normal* (HBO), *Early Edition* (CBS), *Cupid* (ABC), *Parks and Recreation, Chicago Fire* (NBC), and *Proven Innocent* (FOX).

**JAMES LECESNE** *(Playwright)* wrote the short film *Trevor*, which won the 1995 Academy Award for Best Live Action Short and inspired the founding of The Trevor Project, the only nationwide 24-hour suicide prevention and crisis intervention lifeline for LGBTQ. He has created several solo shows, including *Word of Mouth* (Drama Desk, Outer Critic Circle Awards) and *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey* (Outer Critics Circle Award). The New York Times has ranked him among “the most talented solo performers of his (or any) generation.” He starred in *Extraordinary Measures*, written and directed by Eve Ensler; written three novels for young adults; and created *The Letter Q*, a collection of letters by Queer writers to their younger selves. Lecesne was the executive producer of *After the Storm*, a feature length documentary film about 12 young people living in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He was a writer for *Will & Grace*, a story consultant for the UK TV show *Vicious*, and he adapted Armistead Maupin’s *Further Tales of the City* for Showtime (Emmy nomination). An actor as well as a writer, he has appeared on and Off Broadway in *The Best Man, Cloud 9*, and the 30th anniversary production of *Boys in the Band*. 

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**SPECIAL THANKS**

The biggest Hoosier fans, Michael Brosilow, Cathy Taylor Public Relations, Paula Conrad, Marty Higginbotham, Michael Levinson, The Saints, X-Man, and the staff of Stage 773. Our ushers are provided by the Saints—Volunteers for the Performing Arts. For more information visit Saintschicago.org or call (773) 529-5510.
KURT JOHNS (Director) A 20-year Manhattan resident, Kurt had a great performing career in Chicago, in Regionals, Broadway, and National Tours before repatriating to Chicago to concentrate on writing/directing. Kurt was producer at the Apple Tree Theatre and taught at CCPA before co-founding SoloChicago Theatre, whose production of Churchill was a runaway Chicago hit before moving to NYC to play 6 months at New World Stages. Kurt directed SoloChicago’s critically acclaimed The Unfortunates starring Gail Rastorfer. He’s also directed for Apple Tree Theatre, The Auditorium Theatre, Light Opera Works, and Chicago College of Performing Arts. His latest Project, Hello Kitty Must Die (hellokittymustdie.com), co-authored with Gail Rastorfer, has received successful public readings in Chicago, LA, and a recent industry reading in NYC sponsored by Davenport Theatricals. Kurt is happy to be working with American Blues, and thanks Wendy and American Blues for the opportunity. Kurt has a “side hustle” of producing promotional videos for theaters such as Milwaukee Rep. Read more at kurtjohns.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, Theater 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.

JARED GOODING (Lighting Design) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. His design credits include designs for American Blues Theater, Writers Theatre, Milwaukee Rep, Victory Gardens Theater, TimeLine Theatre, Madison Children’s Theater, UIC Theatre, Strawdog Theatre, The Hypocrites, Definition Theatre, Windy City Playhouse, Sideshow Theatre, First Floor Theater, About Face Theatre, MPAACT, Pegasus Theatre, Next Theatre, Congo Square, Citadel Theatre, ETA, Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre, and serving as the Lighting Assistant for The Wiz Live on NBC, along with Associate Designing for Lookingglass Theatre’s tour of Lookingglass Alice. He is a company member with MPACCT. He spends his off time managing a DJ company for Chicago area bars. You can find his work at goodingdesigns.com.

TRAVIS BIHN (Costume Design) is thrilled to be welcomed back to American Blues Theater after previously working on Buddy–The Buddy Holly Story. Other companies he has been grateful enough to work with in the city include Emerald City Theatre (Corduroy, Fantastic Mr. Fox) and Chicago Theatre Workshop (Disaster!). Travis is a 2016 Graduate from The Ohio State University with dual degrees in Theatre and Psychology. He would be nowhere without his family and thanks them for all their love and support.
ERIC BACKUS (Sound Design/Composer) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. His work was most recently heard in Beauty’s Daughter, and he previously worked on Blues’ award winning productions of Hank Williams: Lost Highway and Grounded. Regional credits include Mark Twain's River of Song and The All Night Strut (Milwaukee Rep) and Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley (TheatreSquared). Recent Chicago credits include This Bitter Earth, Bull in a China Shop (About Face Theatre); Becky Shaw, Apartment 3A (Windy City Playhouse); Nice Girl, The Assembled Parties (Raven Theatre); Anna Karenina, and A Wrinkle in Time (Lifeline Theatre). Eric also designed the Off-Broadway, Chicago, and touring productions of SoloChicago Theatre’s Churchill, and the Chicago and LA productions of Thrones! A Musical Parody. To hear more of his music, please visit ericbackus.com.

KEVIN ROLFS (Properties Design) is a Chicago based scenic and props designer happy to be back working with American Blues again after prop designing Flyin’ West this season. A 2017 graduate of Columbia College Chicago, his design work was mostly recently seen in Invictus Theatre’s Love’s Labour’s Lost (scenic), Bring It On: The Musical for Chicago High School for the Arts (scenic), and last season’s Buddy–The Buddy Holly Story (props).

G. “MAX” MAXIN IV (Projections Design) is excited to be working with American Blues Theater for the first time! Max is a two-time Jeff Nominated Freelance Production Designer in Chicago, a full-time instructor at Northwestern University, and is one of the co-founders of Another Door Theatre Project. Since moving to Chicago in 2012, Max has created over 70 designs in more than 50 professional productions in or around the city, and spent two summers working as the touring lighting designer for La Musica Lirica in Novafeltria, Italy. He holds an MFA in Theatrical Production Design from Michigan State University. Favorite Chicago Area credits: Bright Star, 110 in the Shade, Cyrano (Jeff Nomination –Lighting), Urinetown (Jeff Nomination–Lighting), Three Days of Rain, Next to Normal (BoHo Theatre); Pippin, Avenue Q (Mercury Theater); Miracle on 34th Street, Forever Plaid (Theatre at the Center); Spelling Bee, Little Women, Cabaret, Bare (Another Door Theatre Project); and The View Upstairs (Circle Theatre). www.ivMaxin.com

SHANDEE VAUGHAN (Production Manager / Stage Manager) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater and serves as Production Manager. She is excited to be working alongside her Blues family for The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey! Blues credits: On Clover Road, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago! (2016 & 2018), Flyin’ West, Buddy–The Buddy Holly Story, The Columnist, and Little Shop of Horrors. Other recent Chicago credits include: Time Is On Our Side (About Face Theatre), Deathscribe X (WildClaw Theatre), Night in Alachua County (WildClaw Theatre), and The Woman in Black (WildClaw Theatre). Shandee is a freelance stage manager & production manager from Arizona. shandeevaughan.com

MANNY BUCKLEY (Assistant Director) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He is an actor/writer/director based in Chicago. Directing credits include multiple short plays in the Ripped: The Living Newspaper Festival and The One Minute Play Festival. Acting credits include work with Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Steppenwolf Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Court Theatre, Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago Dramatists, Next Theatre, House Theatre, Shattered Globe Theatre, Cincinnati Children’s Theatre, and Studio Theatre. Manny has numerous credits with American Blues Theater, including his critically-acclaimed, award-winning solo performance in Looking Over the President’s Shoulder.
Film credits: *Proven Innocent*, *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago PD*, The US Navy, Northwestern University, and *The Onion*. He has received nominations for the Joseph Jefferson Award, the Helen Hayes Award, and the 3Arts Award; he is the recipient of both a Black Theater Alliance Award and Black Excellence Award. Manny is represented by DeSanti Talent in Chicago, and is a proud member of Actor’s Equity, SAG-AFTRA, and the Dramatist’s Guild. Mr. Buckley is currently developing an original solo show about Frederick Douglass here at American Blues.

GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE (Artistic Director) 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 30 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 Theatres. 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 eight years, nine American Blues’ productions won or were nominated for production by the Joseph Jefferson Award committee. She’s received 14 Joseph Jefferson Awards, Citations, and nominations as an actress and Artistic Director. Her favorite performances include Jeff Award for Solo Performance (*Grounded*), seven years as “Mary Bailey” (*It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*), and “Kate” in *On Clover Road*. She’s the recipient of two After Dark Awards and numerous Broadway World Chicago Awards and nominations.

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 204 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 36 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.

**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.

**AMERICAN BLUES THEATER 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.

“Feels like home.”—Terry Teachout, The Wall Street Journal

“One of our favorites in Chicago!”—Dean Richards, WGN

“Ensemble founded one of Chicago’s most venerable off-loop theaters.”

—Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune
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The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey 13
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David Biller, Treasurer
Jill Valentine, Secretary
Charles H. Jesser, Steve Miller, Brad Younts, McKenna Prohov

Stage 773 is looking for individuals who first and foremost love Chicago theatre. Additionally, we are seeking individuals who have experience in the fields of finance, accounting, human resources, event planning, marketing and legal. Ideal candidates have diverse networks and/or ties to art-supporting companies in the Chicago area. Is this you?

Volunteers contribute, on average, about 4-6 hours a month attending board and committee meetings as well as board-related events. In exchange for your service, you have the opportunity to interact with a truly dynamic group of people and play a vital role in Chicago’s cultural community. From the members on our Board to our patrons, Stage 773 attracts an exciting and extraordinary group of creative and diverse personalities. Contact Jill@stage773.com for more information.

STAGE 773 STAFF

Executive Director................................................................. Jill Valentine
Managing Director ................................................................. Jack Short
General Manager ................................................................. Travis Barnhart
Facilities Manager ............................................................... John Craig
Development Manager ........................................................ Nicole Meunier
Rental Coordinator ............................................................... Meaghan Morris
Box office / Admin Assistant ................................................ Zach Abel
Front of House Manager ...................................................... Chris Chapin
Bar Manager ................................................................. Andrew McDermott
Box Office ......................................................... Zach Abel, Juan Castaneda, Ian McCulloch, Brittani Schiller
Bar ................................................................. Andrew McDermott, Amy Schiller, Walker Lee, Gia Damiano
Technical Staff ................................................................. Chris Chapin, Oriana Dentici, Candace Opper, Dan Sonenberg
Public Relations ............................................................... Heron Agency

Ushering services are provided by The Saints.

Stage 773 is a member of the League of Chicago Theatres and the Belmont Theatre District.