

NEW YORK CITY CENTER
EDUCATION



FEBRUARY 2020

**BEHIND THE CURTAIN:
ENCORES! MACK & MABEL**

Your personal guide to the production.



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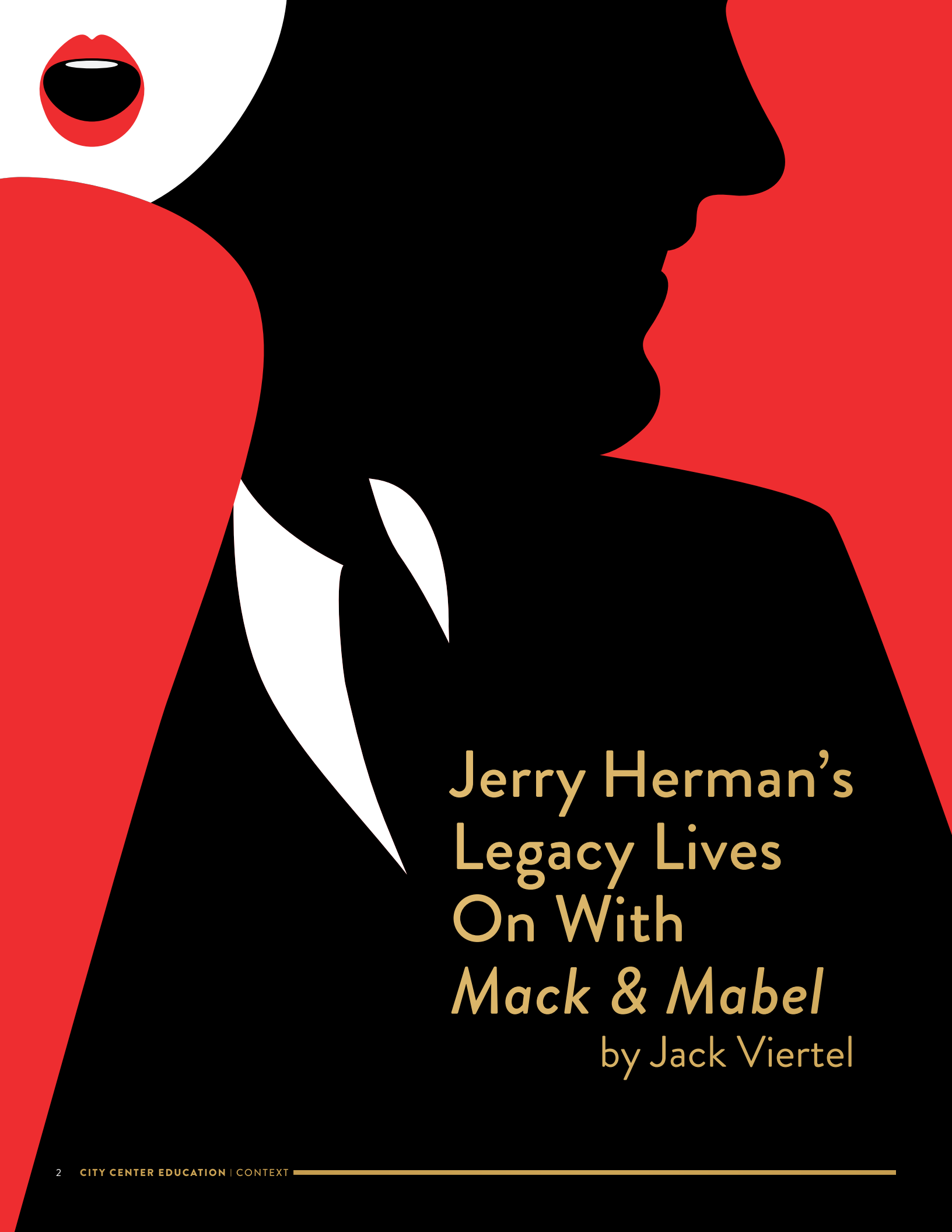
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CONTEXT



Jerry Herman's
Legacy Lives
On With
Mack & Mabel
by Jack Viertel



Jerry Herman, who died at the very end of 2019, probably supplied as much pure pleasure to theatergoers as any Broadway songwriter of the later 20th Century. It was his ambition to be the musical reincarnation of Irving Berlin, and there is a good case to be made that he largely succeeded. More than Berlin's tunefulness, his open-heartedness and his love affair with both love and show business, Herman admired his idol's hard-won simplicity and always fought to achieve it.

Songs like "Put on Your Sunday Clothes," "Hello, Dolly," "Mame," and "The Best of Times" never failed to supercharge audiences, though when carefully examined, they are made by the simplest of means. And ballads like "If He Walked Into My Life" and "Ribbons Down My Back" hid their compositional technique neatly, so that they seem to have come directly from the hearts of the characters singing them, unadorned. But what marked him most as a unique voice was his unchallenged ability to celebrate joy in the moment. He didn't need a special occasion. Any day could be a spectacular day if we made it one, and he wanted us to know that, and feel it.

Be that as it may, it was also Herman, never a man to wave his politics in anyone's face, who created (back in 1983!) "I Am What I Am" an anthem that gave strength, hope, and energy to hundreds of thousands of gay Americans during the AIDS crisis, and helped create a dawning understanding in many more straight ones. It meant to the gay rights movement what Berlin's "This is the Army" must have meant to our soldiers in World War II. He was, alas, the

last of his kind—there will be no musical reincarnation of Jerry Herman. But we will always have the songs. Some of his very best comprise the score of one of his least often seen, but most eagerly anticipated Broadway ventures, *Mack & Mabel*.

When plans were announced for this new musical, Broadway fans must have been ecstatic. After all, the team putting together this valentine to the silent comedy era was the team that had created *Hello, Dolly!*: composer-lyricist Jerry Herman, book-writer Michael Stewart, director-choreographer Gower Champion and producer David Merrick. Almost no team had had comparable success in the years since *Dolly!* opened back in 1964, and here it was 1972. What could possibly go wrong?

The idea for the show came from Jerry Herman's friend Leonard Spigelgass, a Hollywood screenwriter and producer who had one claim to fame as a Broadway playwright—the successful, though now largely forgotten *A Majority of One*, which had starred Yiddish theater favorite Molly Picon, who had also starred in Herman's first musical *Milk and Honey*. Spigelgass believed there was a compelling story in the romance of silent comedy pioneer Mack Sennett and his lover and first comedy star Mabel Normand. The rise-and-fall of their tumultuous affair had more or less paralleled the rise-and-fall of the silent film era itself—a promising structural quirk of fate. Spigelgass was initially slated to write the book for the show but was quickly distracted by other work. So, Herman turned to Michael Stewart, with whom he had had his greatest

success. It was natural for the two of them to bring the project to Champion, who in turn suggested that Merrick—always difficult, but all-powerful—be their producer.

But a lot had happened since 1964. *Dolly!*, which was a smash hit musical comedy, was a kind of joyous throwback to the antic shows of the pre-war era; it didn't always make a lot of sense, but it spread a huge amount of joy. It was also an especially welcome antidote to President Kennedy's assassination, which took place just a few months before it opened. America needed the tonic. In the ensuing ten years before *Mack & Mabel* saw its opening night, things had turned darker, and Broadway musicals were beginning to respond to a restive national mood.

Champion sensed this; he was already trying to recast himself as something more than a stylish merrymaker. Herman and Stewart also recognized that *Mack & Mabel* couldn't and shouldn't try to recreate their earlier success in its tone. It was a tragic romance about silent comedy—not an easy thing to pull off. Still, they went to work enthusiastically, believing that they could have the best of both worlds. Sennett's inventive comic spirit (he can claim credit for innovations like the custard pie-fight and the Keystone Kops, and he was responsible for the early career of Charlie Chaplin) was matched by his workaholic single-mindedness and lack of sentiment. Mabel Normand, meanwhile, was an adorable natural comedienne (as she was called in that era) and a beauty, whose real life was dogged by rumors of alcohol and drug abuse. It was, in some sense, a show about trouble in paradise.

Stewart and Herman created a tragicomedy about two flawed

talents who couldn't live with or without each other, but who made the world laugh while trying to banish their personal demons. Meanwhile, Champion turned to the challenges of creating an event that sometimes behaved like a traditional musical comedy but rarely looked like one. The show was designed so that it appeared to take place largely in Mack Sennett's abandoned studio after his luck had run out, with each of its scenes growing from Mack's memory. There were extensive film clips employed, which ran the risk of being more compelling than the live performers competing with them. Casting was difficult. After Jerry Orbach flirted with the project, Robert Preston was finally cast as Mack. For Mabel, the rising star Bernadette Peters was chosen after three or four more experienced stars were rejected by one or another member of the creative team. Looking to make money on the road, Merrick booked the show on a long tryout tour crossing the country from San Diego to L.A. to St. Louis (where it played the 11,000 seat outdoor arena known as the Muny) to Washington, D.C. before landing at Broadway's Majestic on October 6, 1974. Along the way, *Mack & Mabel* underwent significant changes that suggested a push-pull between Champion's vision of it as a darker, post-60s musical drama and Herman's consistently upbeat, optimistic, and unfailingly attractive score. The opening night product was probably not what any of the creators had hoped for, and Herman, at least, felt that the show had been in better shape in San Diego at the beginning of the tryout than it was by opening night.

The critics were quick to pounce, probably because the team was so famously successful from its last outing, and the outcome was a mere 66 performance run. Years later, Stewart's sister Francine Pascal, who had taken on the task of rewriting the show after

Douglas Sills and Alexandra Socha in Encores!
Hey, Look Me Over!; photo by Joan Marcus



Stewart's death in 1987, began to produce more definitive revisions. Believing that course correction was not only possible but essential, *Mack & Mabel's* new team was able to find something like a final form.

Even in its original production, however, it was virtually impossible to ignore the joy and skill built into Jerry Herman's score, although some critics of the day managed to do so. Herman was particularly besotted with the period of silent movie music—the jangling piano figures and hyper-energized orchestral underscores that were played live in movie theaters across the country to accompany the melodramatic films of the pre-sound era. Beginning at the very top of the show with Mack Sennett's credo that "Movies Were Movies" back in his day, the composer treated theatergoers to a parade of stylistic tributes, while as a lyricist, he evoked some of the most famous silent comedy tropes—drunken ministers, "the guy with the fly on his nose," and "itching powder in papa's mustache." Anyone who has sat through an hour or two of Chaplin or Keaton will recognize the references.

Herman was a strict writer of pastiche, however, and although songs like "Look What Happened to Mabel" and "Tap Your Troubles Away" evoke another time, they always sound blissfully like Jerry Herman. The two ballads from the show that have become cabaret standards, "I Won't Send Roses" and "Time Heals Everything," are also redolent of the past—although the latter perhaps evokes something more from the *film noir* era than from pre-talkies. (It's worth noting that the lonesome, ardent saxophone solo that accompanied it both in the Broadway show and on its original cast album was played by Encores! Music Contractor Red Press—still going strong at 96.)

Mack & Mabel vanished from Broadway quickly, but it has stubbornly refused for more than four decades now to pass into theatrical history, largely on the strength of Jerry Herman's score, which many consider to be his best and most consistent. Revised and revived at various times and places (most successfully in London) it remains a show that audiences want to see. More than a curiosity, never a piece of the standard repertoire, it is, among so many other things, a testament to the challenge of trying to get things right, and to Herman's indefatigable gifts as a songwriter for all times.

Jack Viertel is the artistic director of Encores! and the author of The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built.

“...it remains
a show that
audiences
want to see”



MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM



JERRY HERMAN (Music & Lyrics) *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame*, and *La Cage Aux Folles* are home to some of the most popular, most-often performed and most successful musical hero(in)es of all time, and have given Jerry Herman the distinction of being the first composer/lyricist in history to have had three musicals that ran more than 1,500 consecutive performances on Broadway. His first Broadway show was *Milk and Honey* (1961), followed by *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), *Mame* (1966), *Dear World* (1969), *Mack & Mabel* (1974), *The Grand Tour* (1979), *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), *Jerry's Girls* (1985), and more. His string of awards and honors includes multiple Tony Awards, Grammys, Olivier Awards, Drama Desk Awards, the Johnny Mercer Award, the Richard Rodgers Award, the Oscar Hammerstein Award, the Frederick Loewe Award, the Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Theatre Hall of Fame, and most recently, The Kennedy Center Honors.



MICHAEL STEWART (Book) Michael Stewart (1924-1987) scored on Broadway the first time when he won a Tony Award for his *Bye Bye Birdie* libretto. He was the librettist for *Carnival* (Drama Critics Circle Award) and *Hello, Dolly!*, which earned him both a Tony and Drama Critics prize. Stewart also wrote the lyrics for *Barnum* and the book for: *George M!* (with Francine and John Pascal), *Mack & Mabel*, *The Grand Tour* and *42nd Street* (with Mark Bramble), *Harrigan and Hart*, and *I Love My Wife*.



FRANCINE PASCAL (Revisions) is best known as the creator of the *Sweet Valley High* series (one hundred and twenty million copies world wide). She also created the successful *Fearless* series that has sold over four million copies. Along with Jon Marans (book and Lyrics) and Graham Lyle (the *Tina* composer), she has written a musical *The Fearless Girl* based on her series. Ms. Pascal collaborated with her brother, Michael Stewart, on the musical, *George M!*. As a novelist, she has written YA novels, among them *My Mother Was Never a Kid*, *My First Love and Other Disasters* and *The Ruling Class*, as well as adult novels, *Save Johanna!* and *La Villa*. Her latest adult novel, *Little Crew of Butchers* will be published by Blackstone on May 22nd 2020.



GOWER CHAMPION (Original Broadway Director) worked on Broadway as a solo dancer and choreographer during the '30s and '40s. In 1948, he began to direct as well, and won a Tony Award for his staging of the musical *Lend an Ear*, the show that introduced Carol Channing to New York theater audiences. From then on he choreographed and directed shows including *Bye Bye Birdie*; *Carnival*; *Hello, Dolly!*; *I Do! I Do!*; *The Happy Time*; and *Mack & Mabel*—winning three more Tonys during his career. He finished with a smash hit, when he choreographed and directed a 1980 stage adaptation of the movie classic *42ND STREET*. During the show's tryout in Washington, Champion learned that he had a rare form of blood cancer, and after the first

curtain call on the New York opening night, producer David Merrick informed the cast and the audience that Gower Champion had died that afternoon.



JOSH RHODES (Director & Choreographer) Josh Rhodes has directed and choreographed *Grand Hotel* (NY City Center Encores!), *Tommy* (Kennedy Center), Ken Ludwig's *Baskerville* (Old Globe Theatre), *Paint Your Wagon*, *Guys and Dolls* (Old Globe), *Jersey Boys*, *Paint Your Wagon* (Muny), *Spamalot* (5th Avenue Theatre), *Showboat* (Bucks County Playhouse), *The Sound of Music*, *Evita*, and *Guys and Dolls* (The Asolo Rep), and *Celestina Warbeck and the Banshees* at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. He also choreographed the Broadway productions of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, *It Shoulda Been You*, *First Date* and *Bright Star*. On London's West End, he choreographed *Carousel* at the English National Opera and *Sweeney Todd* starring Emma Thompson. Other choreography credits include *Company* starring Neil Patrick Harris and *Sondheim: The Birthday Concert* (PBS), the U.K. tour of *Doctor Dolittle*, and *Scotland, PA* (Roundabout). Josh is a proud graduate of the University of Michigan.

A NOTE FROM JACK VIERTEL, ENCORES! ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Lear deBessonet

The 2020 season will be my last as the Artistic Director of Encores!, and I suppose one might think that a lot of self-imposed pressure would have been brought to bear on choosing exactly the right shows to make some kind of statement about my two decades leading the program. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Selecting shows for Encores! has always been a wonderfully enjoyable but informal process, in which Rob Berman, our Music Director and I toss around ideas and titles until we feel like we've achieved as perfect a mix as possible: three shows that we are as eager to see as we are to produce, and three that are nothing alike. This year was different only in that we were joined by Lear deBessonet, who will begin her tenure as my successor next season. That only made it more fun, and we proceeded as if it were any other season.

Although we never considered the season a “themed” one—it turned out to have a theme: worlds in transition. And I suppose my world, and maybe the world of Encores! itself are about to change too—so it seems appropriate.

We began with *Mack & Mabel*, a show that has a foot in each of two musical theater worlds, with challenges to match. It's a fascinating show to me because it represents a bold moment in which the artists who made it were trying to be true to their musical comedy roots and also embrace the more serious musical dramas of the 1970s, when it was written. It's a much more serious show than its bouncy and memorable score would suggest—the story is basically, if not tragic, a sad one. The music suggests *Mame* or *Hello, Dolly!*. The romance between silent-movie tycoon Mack Sennett and his first great discovery, the sparkling comedy star Mabel Normand, is buoyed by the sudden success of the movie medium itself, but doomed by those two Hollywood curses: megalomania and drugs. Mack and Mabel love each other madly, but can't find a way to be together. And Jerry Herman, Michael Stewart, and Gower Champion, who made the show together also had their difficulties trying to find a tone that would embrace the past and the future of the form at the same time. Ironically, the subject matter itself embraces a similar transition, from the birth of silent movies to the birth of sound. There are revolutions happening everywhere.

Love Life, which provides a fascinating contrast, was an experiment of a very different sort, this one produced in the 1940s. Alan Jay Lerner and Kurt Weill's only collaboration (they had tremendous success in other collaborations, including *My Fair Lady* and *The Threepenny Opera*), wanted to tell the story of the ever-changing landscape of America itself, exploring its bounty and its history of both glory and greed, personal, and national. So they concocted a married couple with two growing children, and told their story through the course of 150 years of American history in which none of them grew any older. It was bold, unique, and challenging to both audiences and the collaborators themselves. How do you tell a coherent story that features a springtime dance party in the 1700s, a Prohibition cruise in the 1920s, and a divorce court in the 1940s? They settled on the idea of presenting each scene as a vaudeville act, with vaudeville-style songs interrupting the actual storytelling and commenting on it. All in all, it was an extravaganza of bold ideas, which made it both admired and controversial. It's rarely been seen since its run in 1948, and that alone is always an attraction for us. The fact that vaudeville itself was an early incarnation of what has now morphed into shows like *Saturday Night Live*—with standup comedy, music, and sketches all living in a shared environment—means that audiences will be getting not just a survey of history, but of entertainment history as well.

Lear deBessonet has long wanted to work on Dick Scanlan and Jeanine Tesori's *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, the most recent show we've ever done, but one that, despite its relative youth, has seemed more and more problematic in terms of how it treats racial minorities and women. The challenge was how to take a show that was designed to be merely delightful, and scrub out the parts that no longer delight as our views evolve. At its heart, however, it is yet another show about a changing world—New York in the '20s, when women in particular, were experiencing a new kind of freedom. They had only recently won the right to vote, and were asserting their rights to dance, dress, and assert their own ideas about politics and equality in a way that was tremendously exciting for them, and uncomfortable, uncharted territory for a lot of men. It was also a dangerous time, for freedom inevitably comes with risk. And for young women who had grown up sheltered from the real world, the new freedoms were an unknown, and left them vulnerable. So the protagonist Millie, a young woman from the Midwest, who arrives in New York full of dreams and the energy to pursue them, is eager and hopeful—she is also naïve. And as the world changes, she has to run to catch up to it, and figure out how to protect herself.

Mack & Mabel, *Love Life*, and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*: the season is, after all, all about change: historical, theatrical, political, and fundamental. Oddly, we never once talked about it in those terms while we were planning it. In hindsight, it's hard to see it any other way.

MEET THE CAST



**MICHAEL
BERRESSE**
AS **WILLIAM
DESMOND
TAYLOR**

Michael Berresse is a Tony and Olivier nominated actor (*Kiss Me, Kate*) and OBIE award winning director (*[title of show]*). Broadway: over 6,000 performances in 11 shows. Six previous Encores!: *The Golden Apple* (director); *The Bandwagon*; *No, No, Nanette*; *Chicago*; *One Touch of Venus*; and *Call Me Madam*. Film and TV: *State of Play*, *A.I.*, *The Bourne Legacy*, *The Good Wife*, *The Knick*, *Elementary*, *Law & Order*, *Person of Interest*, *Crossbones*. Currently: *Darling Grenadine* at Roundabout (director/choreographer).



**LILLI
COOPER**
AS **LOTTIE
AMES**

Broadway: *Tootsie* (Julie, Tony Nomination), *Spongebob Squarepants* (Sandy), *Wicked* (Elphaba) *Spring Awakening* (original cast). Theater favorites: *Tick, Tick...Boom!* (Keen Company); *Sundown*, *Yellow Moon* (The WP); *The Wildness* (Ars Nova); *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (American Repertory Theater); *The Threepenny Opera* (Atlantic Theater). Television: *Dynasty*, *Bull*, *Instinct*, *Elementary*, *The Code*, *The Good Fight*. LaGuardia Arts High School and Vassar alum. lillicooper.com @lilcoop



**BEN
FANKHAUSER**
AS **FRANK
WYMAN**

Broadway: *Davey in Newsies* (OBC & Movie). 1st national tours: *Beautiful*, *Spring Awakening*. Off-Broadway: *Saturday Night*, *Bar Mitzvah Boy*. Regional: Hartford Stage, Bucks County Playhouse, North Carolina Theatre, Sacramento Music Circus, MT Wichita. TV: *The Deuce*, *Indoor Boys*. Find me on YouTube, Spotify & iTunes. Training: Ithaca College. Cleveland Native. @PlzNfankU



**DOUGLAS
SILLS**
AS **MACK
SENNETT**

Broadway/New York: *War Paint*; *Scarlet Pimpernel* (Tony & Drama Desk Nominations); *Living on Love*; *Little Shop of Horrors* (Drama League Award); *Nantucket Sleighride*, *Hey Look Me Over!*, *Lady Be Good*, *Music in the Air*, *Carnival* (Encores). National Tour: *The Addams Family*; *The Secret Garden*; *Into the Woods*. Regional: starring roles at La Jolla, Long Wharf, Westport, Kennedy Center, South Coast Rep, Reprise, California Shakespeare Festival. TV/Film: *Katy Keene*, *Chicago Justice*, *CSI*, *The Closer*, *Numb3rs*, *Will & Grace*, *Erotic Fire of the Unattainable*, *Deuce Bigelow: European Gigolo*.



**ALEXANDRA
SOCHA**
AS **MABEL
NORMAND**

Broadway: *Head Over Heels*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Spring Awakening*. Off-Broadway: *Actually* (MTC), *Fun Home* (The Public), *Paint Your Wagon* and *Hey Look Me Over!* both at Encores! & more. Television: Skye on the Amazon Original *Red Oaks*. Guest star on *Blue Bloods*, *SVU*, *Damages*, *The Big C*. Thanks to Jack, Rob, and Marc for thinking of me two years ago and giving me the gift of Mabel. For Mom, always. www.endalz.org



**MAJOR
ATTAWAY**
AS **FATTY
ARBUCKLE**

City Center Debut! Broadway: *Aladdin* (Genie). National Tour: *Aladdin* (Genie). Regional: *Hot Mikado* (Mikado), *Stagger Lee* (T-Bone), *Hands on a Hardbody* (Ronald), *Little Shop of Horrors* (A2), *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Ken), *Frosty the Snowman* (Frosty). Television: *Orange Is the New Black* (DeShaun McAdams). Video Games: *Borderlands 3* (Clay), *Battleborn* (Ghalt). Thanks to Erica & Ben at Headline Talent! @majorattaway #BigTexGeni



**JORDAN
GELBER**
AS MR.
KESSEL

Broadway: *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Buddy in Elf*, *All My Sons*, *Avenue Q* (original cast). Off-Broadway: John Guare's *Nantucket Sleigh Ride* (LCT), Mike Leigh's *2000 Years*; *Avenue Q*; Tina Howe's *Birth and After Birth*. TV: *Elementary*, *Mr. Robot*, *Mindhunter*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *The Sopranos*, and many more. Film: *The Kitchen*, *Bleed For This*, *Dark Horse*, *Everyday People* (IFP/Gotham Award nominee for Breakthrough Acting). BA, Stanford University; MFA, NYU Tisch Graduate Acting (2000 Laura Pels Award). www.JordanGelber.com



**RAYMOND
J. LEE**
AS ANDY

Raymond is excited to be returning for his third Encores! having previously been in *The Wild Party* and *Applause*. Broadway: *Aladdin*, *Groundhog Day*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Anything Goes*, *Mamma Mia!* Off-Broadway: *Soft Power* (The Public), *Two Gentleman of Verona* (The Public). Regional: CTG, ACT, La Jolla, Portland Center Stage, The MUNY. Film/TV: *Marriage Story*, *Ghost Town*, *Succession*, *Billions*, *Red Oaks*, *Smash*. Love to Ella & Robbi. Go U Northwestern! Follow @raymondjlee and visit www.RaymondJLee.com



**EVAN
KASPRZAK**
AS FREDDY

Evan is ecstatic to be returning to City Center! Recent credits: *Fosse/Verdon* (FX), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon), *Cats* (Broadway Revival), Disney's *Newsies* (Broadway, Nat'l Tour, Papermill Playhouse), *The New Yorkers* (Encores!), *The Golden Apple* (Encores!), *Freddie Falls in Love* (The Joyce). Mr. Kasprzak is a proud Illinois Wesleyan University graduate. Many thanks to Josh, Lee, Rob, the whole creative team, and Lakey Wolff & CO. Love to the fam and Britta.



**KEVIN
LIGON**
AS EDDIE

Kevin recently played Rudolph in *Hello, Dolly!* starring Bette Midler. Other Broadway shows include *On The Twentieth Century*; *Bullets Over Broadway*; *The Phantom Of The Opera*; *Sister Act*; *Finian's Rainbow*; *Young Frankenstein*; *The Producers*; *Kiss Me, Kate*; *1776*; *The Secret Garden*. Other credits include Cogsworth in *Beauty And The Beast* (Paper Mill Playhouse), Max in *The Sound Of Music* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival), Mr. Bumble in *Oliver!* (Pioneer Theatre Company), Pirelli in *Sweeney Todd* (Kennedy Center). This marks Kevin's sixth show with Encores!



**JANET
NOH**
AS ELLA

Janet is delighted to return to New York City Center for her stage debut after being asked by Jeanine Tesori to perform her original songs for *Front & Center* in 2017. Formerly a Wall Street analyst, Noh made her ensemble cast debut in *Rocktopia* (Broadway) and has performed her songs at Lincoln Center, Signature Theatre, and The Public Theater. She wrote songs for the upcoming feature film *Anastasia* (Paramount, Netflix) and recently gave a TED talk at TEDx MidAtlantic Conference. BA: Yale University; MFA: NYU-Tisch (Musical Theatre Writing). @janetnoh



**ALLEN LEWIS
RICKMAN**
AS MR.
BAUMAN

Broadway: *Relatively Speaking*. Off-Broadway: *So Help Me God!*, *Far And Wide* (Mint), the Yiddish *Pirates Of Penzance* (also co-adapted and directed). Regional: *ROOM SERVICE* (Cleveland Playhouse), *Victor/Victoria* (Paper Mill), *Waiting For Godot* (Two River). Film/Tv: Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man*, *You Don't Know Jack* (with Al Pacino), *Boardwalk Empire* (Recurring), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (as Red Skelton). His co-authored farce *Off The Hook* has been produced across Europe and published in French.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR ALEXANDRA SOCHA

Alexandra Socha returns to City Center for *Mack & Mabel*, her third Encores! production. Sharon Counts, City Center's Director of Education and Community Engagement, spoke with Ms. Socha about preparing to take on the role of Mabel Normand and what she's learned along the way.



SHARON COUNTS: HOW DID YOU COME TO BE AN ACTOR?

Alexandra Socha: My mother always participated in community theatre and I was in my first local play at age 5 because I wanted to be up on the stage just like her. Since then, it has been the only thing I've ever wanted to do. During my junior year of high school, I went to an open call audition in Boston for the Broadway musical, *Spring Awakening*. Two months later, casting called me and asked if I could come down to New York for a callback with the full creative team to replace one of the Ensemble/Swings in the show. My parents and I traveled to the city and I had my audition. After it was done, we started driving to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as I was supposed to be attending orientation day at the Carnegie Mellon University Summer Pre-College Program for Musical Theatre. Halfway through our trip, my phone rang and it was the casting director offering me the job.

One week later, I left my home in New Hampshire and moved to New York City to start rehearsals for a Broadway show, and have been a professional actor ever since. This is, by no means, NORMAL, by the way. I don't know why this happened to me in this fashion and it was not always easy. I was still a teenager when I began working and had no real training or understanding of how the business worked. Everything I've learn in the last 12.5 years, I have learned on the job, in the moment, and through many mistakes, acquiring a lot of bumps and bruises along the way. But that doesn't mean I haven't been incredibly lucky to have been exposed to the "real world" from day one. Something I always tell young performers is, whatever your path ends up being, always try to be learning from those around you. Just stay curious.

SC: THIS PRODUCTION MARKS YOUR RETURN TO THE ROLE OF MABEL, WHAT DRAWS YOU TO THIS CHARACTER?

AS: Well, I relate very much to the beginnings of her journey in show business as you can see from my previous answer. While I always knew I wanted to be an actress and Mabel has no idea it's even something she's good at, we both started working professionally at about the same age and both knew next to nothing about show business when we started. So I feel an instant kinship with her.

What I love about Mabel though, is that the prospect of her entire life changing on a dime doesn't seem to scare her. In fact, nothing seems to scare her. She just embraces the good in whatever situation she's in (until it turns not-so-good anymore). Even when she decides to leave Mack, she does it with a big song and a dramatic exit and without fear about what could be next; there is not one ounce of meekness to her. I myself have lived with pretty intense anxiety for most of my life, so it's a gift getting to learn from Mabel's fearlessness.

SC: HOW ARE YOU PREPARING FOR THE ROLE BEFORE REHEARSALS BEGIN?

AS: Fortunately, because most of her films are over 100 years old (!!!!!) and public domain, and awesome people on the Internet have put almost all of them up on YouTube, I've been slowly working my way through her catalog. It's really incredible to watch her faces and mannerisms; she was very much a physical comedian and her slapstick is on par with her frequent co-star Charlie Chaplin, so I'm thinking of ways to work that in. The films run only about 10-15 minutes, and of course they are all silent, so sometimes I put a playlist of old ragtime piano music on Spotify to give them some ambience.

There's really no well-reviewed biography on her so I've scoured the internet for basically any piece of information that exists and joined a Facebook group dedicated to her, that is full of Mabel enthusiasts and documentarians. Her grand-nephew, who I'd consider the definitive historical source on her life, is a member so I was able to get in touch with him. Also, Mabel was also from Staten Island (not Brooklyn, like they wrote in the show) so I'm going to make a trip there one day before rehearsals start to visit their Historical Society. The musical does take its fair share of liberties with her and Mack's actual lives and ultimately, you have to perform the play that is written. We are not doing a bio-pic so if the timeline is off, you just have to roll with it.

I'm at my voice lesson each week to work on the songs with my teacher. I've also been chatting a lot with our wonderful director, Josh Rhodes, about particular moments in the script and getting an idea of his vision for the play, since we have such limited rehearsal time. This helps me come in with more thoughts and choices prepared for our very condensed rehearsal process. We have to be instinctual, so the more prep work you do beforehand, the easier it is to go for it.

SC: OUR AUDIENCES RANGE FROM LIFE-LONG FANS OF THE PRODUCTION TO FIRST-TIME THEATERGOERS. WHAT DO YOU HOPE AUDIENCE MEMBERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THIS REVIVAL?

AS: What I tend to hear from fans of *Mack & Mabel* is "great score (music), horrible script" and I have to say, as I've read the different versions, I think I disagree with all of those people.

Since Jerry Herman's [*Mack & Mabel's* Composer and Lyricist] previous hits were *Hello Dolly!* and *Mame*, splashy shows with lighter plots, he was told by producers he had to give his audiences that same "wow-factor". So there were these huge classic Broadway production numbers, but this darker story behind them that I'm not sure fans of his work back then could appreciate in a way we can now. They probably found it confusing. I think a lot of people back then missed what he and Michael Stewart [*Mack & Mabel's* Bookwriter] were trying to say about Mack and Mabel's dysfunctional relationship, that is actually very profound, relatable, and real.

So, in that way, my hope for ALL audiences of the show, new or old, is that they come away really seeing the story with a clarity on the themes and a deeper understanding of these characters. The music is beautiful, but there are very interesting things happening around the music, and I hope this production can shine a new light on them.

But, since it has always been a favorite score for fans of musicals, I hope they are enraptured by hearing these gorgeous songs with a 30-piece orchestra and feel the wait for this show has been worth it.

SC: THIS WILL BE YOUR THIRD TIME PERFORMING ON CITY CENTER'S STAGE (PAINT YOUR WAGON AND HEY, LOOK ME OVER!). DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE MEMORY?

AS: During *Hey, Look Me Over!*, which was a review of different musical numbers from many shows, the final number was "Give My Regards to Broadway" from the musical *George M!* which originally starred Joel Grey. Now, what audiences didn't know, was that Joel Grey was actually a surprise special guest not listed in the program and he would come out on stage in a spotlight each night to perform this number again almost 50 years later. The crowd would gasp and break into wild applause and the energy was so exciting.



Every performance, me and everyone backstage would stand in the wings and watch the number, grinning wildly from ear to ear and marveling at the chance to see this legend of our business perform such a famous song. We were all fans of his, just like the audience, and I have to admit, I wept on the last performance at how lucky we all felt.

SC: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG PERFORMERS?

AS: I said it before, but it bears restating: Stay Curious. Curiosity is your greatest asset as an artist. And really, as a human. Open minds are key.

LEARN things. Never stop learning. You will never know everything and that is wonderful, because it means there are always new things to learn about. And learn about more than just theatre. Because this business can be hard to break into, it makes you believe you have to have an Olympian-like tunnel vision, blocking out anything that is not related to acting, in order to achieve any success. But how can you make art about the world if you are not experiencing it?

Read, read, read, for one thing. Read books, go to museums, go see the ballet or symphony, take a long walk and just observe your own thoughts or the habits of the strangers walking down the street. Write in a journal. Learn to meditate. Anything that opens up your periphery and helps you see the world as a large place you are lucky to get to be one small part of will help you put the rest of things in perspective. And it makes making art all the more fun!



RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

BEFORE THE SHOW

Mack & Mabel follows the career of silent-film director Mack Sennet. In this activity, students will create their own moving film frames using lyrics from the show.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will gain an introductory understanding of filmmaking and NYC's role in the origins of the film industry

BLUEPRINT BENCHMARKS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THEATER, GRADES 6-12

- Students participate in group activities, including creative play, storytelling, pantomime and improvisation.
- Students apply skills and understanding from other disciplines and art forms when analyzing and making theater.

PLAY

Lead students through a game of "Simon Says." After several rounds, change the phrasing of "Simon says," to "director says" and direct students to act out different scenarios e.g., "You're trying to outrun a train in slow motion."

INTRODUCE

Facilitate a discussion about silent-films of the early 1900's and ask students to share what they already think or know about silent-films. Share with students that many of the first silent-film studios were located in the boroughs of NYC and that the beginning of *Mack & Mabel* takes place at a studio in Brooklyn. Introduce students to Mack Sennet and Mabel Normand, two icons and collaborators of the silent-film industry and the subjects of *Mack & Mabel*. The musical takes place in the glory age of silent-film making and is loosely based off of Sennet and Normand's real-life romantic and working relationship.

ACTIVATE

In small groups, students should elect one person to act as the "director", with the other students serving as "actors." Encourage each group of students to select one scenario from the lyrics of the song "Tap Your Troubles Away" from *Mack & Mabel*. After each group selects a scenario, ask students to create a still stage picture or a film "frame" depicting the chosen scenario. Once they've created their frame, ask students to also create a before and after image to create a total of three frames that tell the story of the scenario. Prompt the director to rehearse the frames in order and in reverse order using counts 1,2,3.

Lyric Scenarios from "Tap Your Troubles Away":

- Boss gives you the axe.
- Boat goes over the falls.
- Parachute snaps.
- Car got in a wreck.
- Plane stalls.

PRESENT

Ask the groups to present their moving film frames in subsequent order. As the groups present, the audience will see a moving image frame by frame.

REFLECT

After each group has presented their moving film frames, encourage students to reflect on the following questions.

- As a director, how did you ensure that the story was being told through the frames?
- As actors, how did you depict the scenarios without text?
- As audience members, how did you understand what was happening in other groups' scenes?

MAD LIBS

MACK'S FIRST DAY ON SET

Today is our first day on the film set of _____.
MOVIE NAME

As the film's director, it is my job to work with the _____ and to
NOUN

make sure that the _____ gets told. I like to make people
NOUN

_____ with my movies and _____ is no exception!
VERB **MOVIE NAME**

If we have the time, I'll _____ the scene with the actors
VERB

while the crew sets up the microphones and _____.
PLURAL NOUN

When the actors and crew members are ready to go, I'll be sure to
call _____!
INSTRUCTION

_____ and work with the camera operator to get a different
PLURAL NOUN

_____. Since the film is on a tight schedule, I'll have to keep
NOUN

everyone on task and make decisions _____. The director's
ADVERB

job is a busy one but there is nothing better than _____!
NOUN

AFTER THE SHOW

OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider how technology can limit or enhance storytelling capabilities.

BLUEPRINT BENCHMARKS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THEATER, GRADES 6-12

- Students participate in group activities, including creative play, storytelling, pantomime and improvisation.
- Students apply skills and understanding from other disciplines and art forms when analyzing and making theater.

GENERATE

Ask students to generate a list of current technological devices (e.g. iPhone, GPS, Smart TV, Laptop, etc.) and prompt students to consider how their daily lives would be affected without this technology? Spend time brainstorming together on ways they would complete tasks differently without them.

Provide students with a brief history of films with sound, also known as “talking films”, or “talkies.” Note that sound technology coupled with image was introduced at a commercial level in the middle to late 1920’s due to technological advancements in the field. Ask students to consider the technological advancements they observed while watching *Mack & Mabel*. How were the characters’ careers and lives affected by new technologies in filmmaking?

Maintaining the same groups from the pre-show activity, ask students to revisit and rehearse their moving motion pictures from the pre-show activity. Once students have rehearsed their original frames, ask directors to assign text to the actors using an AB Scene template that you provide. The directors may divide the dialogue up between different frames and characters, but the lines must stay in order. Feel free to use the one provided.

A/B SCENE:

A: Oh.

B: Yes

A: Why are you doing this?

B: It’s the best thing.

A: You can’t mean it.

B: No, I’m serious.

PRODUCE

Once directors have assigned text to the actors, groups should spend time rehearsing their “talking films”. If you have access to an iPad or filming device, encourage directors to explore filming their “talkies,” taking into consideration the composition of the shot and focusing on framing the speaking characters. Groups presenting their work live should devise transitions between their frames to create a seamless theatrical piece.

PRESENT

Ask the groups to present their “talkies” by sharing video footage or performing the live scenes for the student audience.

REFLECT

After each group has presented, reflect on the following questions.

- How did the incorporation of spoken text change or enhance the formerly silent film frames?
- What choices did you make to transition from one frame to the next?
- If you were able to shoot video, what were the challenges you faced trying to capture the film?
- If you were making a real film, what other technologies or design components might you incorporate in your films?

GLOSSARY

BOUDOIR

A woman's dressing room, bedroom, or private sitting room.

A newspaper headline mentions a murder that takes place in a boudoir.

DESPOT

A leader who exercises complete control, typically in an oppressive fashion.

Frank refers to Mack as a stultifying despot.

GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

Organization for Veterans of the American Civil War.

Upon arriving in Los Angeles, the group finds themselves in the middle of a Grand Army of the Republic parade.

MUCKRAKERS

Term used for writers who were dedicated to publicly exposing real or apparent misconduct.

Mack wants to send Mabel away so "those filthy muckrakers can't find her."

STULTIFY

To inhibit, impair, or hold back.

Frank refers to Mack as a stultifying despot.

TALKIES

An informal term for "talking pictures." Widely used in the late 1920s and early 1930s to distinguish between sound and silent films.

Mack predicts that audiences will be bored with talkies in five years.

TROUSSEAU

Belongings collected by the bride for her marriage.

Mack tells the audience that Mabel went out and bought herself the most gorgeous trousseau.

In his case, Mack may be specifically referring to a wedding gown

TWO-REELER

A short film. Refers to the number of reels the movie's film is on.

Mack's film studio focuses on making two-reelers.



UP NEXT FOR CITY CENTER EDUCATION

FRONT & CENTER WITH KATE BALDWIN



MON, MAR 16 2020 Kate Baldwin's (*Hello, Dolly!*, upcoming in *Love Life* at City Center) master class, **Thinking on Your Feet**, invites participants into the immediacy of what they are about to do as performers. Focusing on asking what has happened to their character in the moment before the music begins, students launch into their songs for a deep dive into their material. Using tools from her own experience, Baldwin will lead performers through a dissection of the surprising components of a song you may not have considered until now.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO
NYCityCenter.org/FrontAndCenter

CITY CENTER ON THE MOVE



APR – MAY 2020 Expanding on our mission to make the best in the performing arts accessible to all, City Center On The Move, now in its second season, is designed to bring the extraordinary artists from our stages directly to New Yorkers in their neighborhoods. City Center On the Move will immerse communities in world-class performance featuring NYC based investigative theater company The Civilians.

In order to share The Civilians work with the broadest possible cross-section of New Yorkers, City Center has partnered with the NYC Parks Department and the Queens Public Library to select 6 tour stops. Exact dates and locations for all tour stops will be announced at a later date.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO
NYCityCenter.org/OnTheMove/

ENCORES! DIRECTING APPRENTICESHIP



APR – MAY 2020 City Center is committed to building pathways to careers in the arts for candidates from underrepresented communities. In conjunction with the 2020 Encores! season, City Center is searching for an engaged and dedicated early-career individual to serve as the Directing Apprentice.

Through the program, apprentices will work directly with a mentor, observe and support rehearsals and performances, meet with City Center staff and artists, and receive professional development workshops. All applications are due by Sunday, February 23 at 11:59pm.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO
NYCityCenter.org/education/college-apprenticeships



NEW YORK CITY CENTER EDUCATION

VISION STATEMENT

The mission of New York City Center Education is to ignite an appreciation of the performing arts, cultivate the creative mind, and create a culture of inquiry and exploration. Committed to drawing inspiration from works on the mainstage, New York City Center Education strives to provide innovative, accessible arts education to schools and communities across New York City.

ABOUT NEW YORK CITY CENTER EDUCATION

Each year City Center reaches over 11,000 students from NYC public and private schools, kindergarten to grade 12, through dance and musical theater performances and in-school workshops. In-depth residencies engage young people in building technical and expressive skills, personal voice, and collaborative spirit. Innovative workshops are crafted for families, seniors, and other special groups that express an interest in collaborating with City Center.

Through the Introduction to Performing Arts program, students have the opportunity to view live performing arts at City Center. At the Workshop level, students receive two in-school workshops in addition to attending a live performance. Residencies provide in-depth multi-week study around one of the productions presented during the season. During the 2019-2020 Season, City Center Education offers students the opportunity to study dance and musical theater productions from City Center's mainstage.

