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CONTACT: Kori Radloff, korir@rosetheater.org, 402-502-4641

***Best Christmas Pageant Ever* shows imperfect side of the holidays at The Rose**

Hilarious Christmas musical is anything but a silent night

(OMAHA, Nebr.) There's not much chance of a silent night when the Herdman family disrupts the church's annual holiday production in ***The Best Christmas Pageant Ever***, which run December 1-23 on The Rose Theater's mainstage.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is a musical written by Jahnna Beecham and Malcom Hillgartner, based on the popular novel by Barbara Robinson, that tells the story of the Herdman siblings, known throughout town as "the worst kids in the history of the world." This family from the wrong side of the tracks creates panic wherever they go, causing fights, stealing lunches, biting classmates and worse! When the Herdmans show up at Sunday School because of the free snacks, the churchfolk have no doubt that the kids are up to no good.

"This play to me is, at its heart, a story about judging people," says guest director Anthony Clark-Kaczmarek.

Chief among those prejudging the Herdmans is Helen Armstrong (played by Theresa Sindelar), the town's resident dictator-like perfectionist. She has been leading the church's unchanging Christmas pageant rigidly for years and knows exactly how it should be done. When she breaks her leg and winds up in the hospital just as rehearsals are starting, Grace Bradley (Sarah Gibson) reluctantly takes up directing the show. The timing couldn't be worse when the rambunctious Herdman children (played by Kaeli Vondra, Chase Robinson, Wayne Hudson, Luke Nieland, Josiah Hydeen and Jonas Caruso).

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The Rose Theater
2001 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68102

t (402) 345-4849
f (402) 344-7255
www.rosetheater.org



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“These student actors carry the brunt of the work in this musical,” says Clark-Kaczmarek. “You are going to see -- at a children’s theater -- the children do the work. This is not a case where the adults do the work and the kids are just part of the little ensemble. This is a story about students, and it is a story about many different types of students. They really do an amazing amount of work and have a lot on their plate -- tons of big musical numbers, tons of lines. They really do a lot.”

When the Herdmans elbow their way to getting all the best parts, Grace decides to give these rambunctious kids a chance to shine, much to the chagrin of the rest of the town. The church ladies fear that it may be the worst Christmas pageant ever and call for Grace to cancel the entire thing. It’s up to Grace and Reverend Hopkins (Kabin Thomas) to help their community see the Christmas story (and the Herdman kids) through new eyes.

As the principal at Buffett Middle School, Clark-Kaczmarek says he sees students like the Herdmans all the time. “Buffett has great diversity, from the very wealthy to the poor. The Herdmans are kids who don’t have some of the same advantages as the other kids. In the show, these kids are prejudged as troublemakers, but the reality is that the townspeople don’t really know them at all.”

It was important to him that the Herdmans be portrayed not as caricatures, but as realistic kids from a challenging background. “This type of play could be directed, staged and cast in a way that presents the Herdmans very two-dimensionally. Instead, I wanted to create a play about enlightenment and discovery.”

“For example, there is a song called ‘Die, Herod, Die,’ that will come off as this crazy, wild, hilarious song, but really what the song is about is the Herdmans trying to get everyone to understand that there’s always a story that doesn’t get told, a side that doesn’t get understood,” he says. “It’s the Herdmans who tell us, ‘What about that person you never considered? What about that side of the story?’”

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is set in what Clark-Kaczmarek describes as an idyllic 1960s Norman Rockwell painting -- but slightly off-kilter. Scenic designer Edward Matthew Walter explains that when he first met with the director, he had a unique concept. “The idea here is that we have this great image, but we are actually going to be looking off to the side, over here and asking what is happening outside the ‘perfect’ frame,” he says.

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The show's songs reflect the pop and country styles of the early 1960s. From the doo-wop girl grooves sounds of 'Countin' on You,' to the folksy sounds of 'On A Night Like This,' the country stylings of 'Let There Be Joy,' and the holiday twist, 'My Mother Said,' the music feels both familiar and new.

"This play draws you in a fun, light, 60s sort of feel, with some really cute characters and some cute songs," says Clark-Kaczmarek. "But, but the time you get to the end of the show, you realize that maybe not only you, but also this entire town, has misunderstood and prejudged these kids, and realized that they are really very much like themselves."

Setting the play in the 1960s has given costume designer Sherri Geerdes an opportunity to create eye-catching period costumes that are sure to delight audiences. While doing research for the show, she uncovered an article from a 1961 Glamour magazine entitled, "8 girls with jobs in Omaha: the how-to of fashion insurance" that highlighted the oh-so-glamorous life of young women working at Mutual of Omaha at the time. The article became her inspiration for the show's look: big hairdos, fitted dresses with full skirts, saddle shoes and oh-so-proper fineries. "Everyone wore gloves," says Geerdes. "In the 60s, as a woman, you always wore a dress to church. Women wore hats and gloves and purses that matched the gloves that matched the shoes. Men only wore suits and ties -- never shirt sleeves. It is a different period, but it is very fun for us to do."

Props designer Devon Denn-Young also found local inspiration as she created the many different objects used onstage -- most notably, the TV dinners used in the show, inspired by Swanson's Salisbury steak, the most popular TV dinner in 1962. She has spent hours hand-drawing foil crinkles on trays and recreating the look of the food's packaging. Other throwback items that audiences will enjoy seeing include milk glasses, ice cream containers and cartfuls of 1960s era Christmas decorations (that the Herdmans are stealing from throughout the town).

For Clark-Kaczmarek, there is deep meaning in setting the story during the 1960s. "There were so many social rules that existed," he explains. "Not just with what we wore, but also how we behaved, and specifically, who we were around and who we allowed in our social spheres. That is precisely what we tried to look at when we looked at the casting of the show."

Although the show portrays characters as a part of specific families, Clark-Kaczmarek made a conscious decision to put together actors in untraditional ways. "We are breaking the rules in the terms of the way that you would expect the families to look during this time period," he says. "We were looking for casting that was beyond the idea that these people all need to have a similar shape and size. In and amongst these families, there is a lot of variety, and that was done very specifically."

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Clark-Kaczmarek believes that by breaking the social convention and challenging the way audience believe families should look, theatergoers will be better able to understand the Herdmans and why it is important not to prejudge others.

“This is where the principal in me comes -- this is about understanding that we have a group of people who are working together who just don’t understand each other. It is really a matter of clarity and enlightenment of who they are. Sometimes, we don’t understand what the people across town are going through from where we are, and we don’t take the time to look and see and understand. We have these social rules that keep us from doing that,” he says.

In a heartfelt moment, the Herdmans change their outlook on life,

“Through this wonderfully funny musical, we get to learn who the Herdmans are, to understand who the Herdmans are, beyond what we have prejudged them to be. By the end of the play, we do understand. We have that complete view, not only of who the Herdmans are, but who we maybe should be, not only at this time of year, but always.”

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever runs December 1-23, 2017, with performances Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm, select Saturdays at 7 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. The 2 pm show on Saturday, December 16 will be interpreted for people who are deaf or hard of hearing; this show will also include audio description services for audience members who are blind. Contact The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 for more information.

Tickets for ***The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*** are \$27 for main floor and \$22 for balcony. Discount ticket vouchers are available at all area Hy-Vee stores for \$22. Members of The Rose receive discounted tickets to the production.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is sponsored by Children’s Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Hy-Vee, Omaha Steaks, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Special opening night activities, including live reindeer, a sleigh for photo opportunities, Christmas caroling, crafts with Mrs. Claus and a visit from Santa, are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

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About the Playwrights

Jahnna Beecham and Malcom Hillgartner met while acting at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, were married onstage at the Empty Space Theatre in Seattle, and have been collaborating on things theatrical and literary ever since. Other musicals include *Dogpark*, *Chaps!*, and *Chaps! A Jingle Jangle Christmas*, published by Samuel French; *Holmes and Watson Save The Empire*, *They Came From Way Out There*, and *The Doll People Musical*. Under the pen name Jahnna N. Malcolm they have written 130 books for young adults and children including *The Jewel Kingdom*, *Bad News Ballet*, and *Scared Stiff*. They adapted and Jahnna directed the film of their book, *The Ruby Princess Runs Away*, which won Best Picture at the 2001 Burbank Int'l Children's Film Festival. Their humorous parenting columns for Sesame Street Parents magazine were compiled into a book titled *I'm Counting to 10*, and was a Parents Choice Award winner in 2002. Jahnna continues to direct professionally in theatres across the US, while Malcolm is an award-winning narrator of over 150 audiobooks. In 2013, they appeared on the stage together as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. They are most proud of their best and brightest collaboration, their son Dash and daughter Skye.

About the Author and the Book

Barbara Robinson wrote the popular children's novel *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and its sequels, *The Best School Year Ever* and *The Best Halloween Ever*. The original book, which many consider to be a holiday classic, was named an ALA Notable Children's book and received the Georgia Children's Book Award, the Indiana's Young Hoosier Book Award, and Minnesota's Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award. In 2012, it was also included in SLJ's Top Hundred Children's Novels list.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever first appeared in McCall's Magazine. "The Herdmans bring a chaotic sincerity and authenticity to the evening that is truly moving," said School Library Journal in its review. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* has sold over 800,000 copies and was adapted into a play, first performed in Seattle at the Children's Theater in 1982. ABC television also produced a television movie of the story in 1983 starring Loretta Swit, for which Robinson wrote the screenplay. A musical adaptation made its world premiere at the Children's Theatre of Charlotte in December 2016.

In 2012 the book was named the No. 73 Top Children's Novel in the YA list compiled by SLJ blogger Betsy Bird, based upon recommendations from her readers. "She made an original Christmas story that was honestly real, human and touching," Bird said in her entry. "Her book lasted and lasted and lasted and remains pretty much the top Christmas chapter book for kids out there outside of *A Christmas Carol*."

Robinson was born in Portsmouth, Ohio on October 12, 1927, to Theodore L. and Grace Mooney Webb. After her father's death when she was three years old, her mother, a teacher, raised her alone. She attended Allegheny College, from which she received an honorary doctorate of letters later in life. In 1949, she married John F. Robinson of Berwyn, PA. After college, Robinson worked as a librarian in Sewickley, PA.

Robinson passed away on July 11, 2013.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education. In 2016, *American Theatre* magazine named The Rose one of the 20 top children's theaters in the United States. The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year. Over the course of a year, approximately 70,000 people attend the public performances held at the theater, and nearly 30,000 students attend field trip shows annually. The theater strives to introduce young people to a mix of both traditional favorites and ground-breaking original productions. A number of plays and musicals have made their world premiere on The Rose stage, including *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*. We take pride knowing that The Rose is the place where children of all ages experience theater for the first time, and we are dedicated to helping them appreciate theater for a lifetime.

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