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World premiere original play at The Rose Theater tackles the problem of being popular

Popularity Coach makes world debut at The Rose

(OMAHA, Nebr.) It's the age-old problem that has plagued young people for ages: how to be popular? This question is the crux of the original play, *Popularity Coach*, making its world debut at The Rose Theater, Oct. 7 - 23, 2022.

Popularity Coach, an original comedy written by Rose Playwright-in-Residence Brian Guehring, follows grade schoolers Cooper and Mia, two kids who just can't seem to fit in with their peers: Cooper is just not like the sports-playing, superhero-loving boys in his class. Mia also finds it challenging to be friends with her female classmates, who obsess about braiding hair and ballet classes.

Popularity Coach offers a humorous look at a heavy dilemma for young people everywhere: How do you find your way among your peers and yet stay true to who you are?

"What I love about the set-up of *Popularity Coach* is that it describes something that kids take very seriously but in a way that is light-hearted and fun," says Rose Artistic Director Matthew Gutschick.

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Mia and Cooper's problems seem to be solved when a popular seventh grader named Blake offers to be their "popularity coach" (for a low, low price). Cooper and Mia sign up, hoping maybe they will finally figure out how to win friends.

"Blake is Mia and Cooper's seventh-grade neighbor down the block, and for just \$8, he is willing to become their 'popularity coach,'" explains Guehring. "He teaches them everything that he used when he was at their elementary school to become the most popular kid. However, the things that worked for him do not work for Cooper and Mia."

"At the end of the piece, Cooper and Mia learn to just really embrace who they are. The show has a great message for all kids," says Gutschick.

The spirit of **Popularity Coach** has already resonated with national audiences, even though the show will make its official world premiere at The Rose this month. The script was workshopped at New York University's New Plays for Young Audiences Conference, a highly-competitive program that performs readings of Theatre for Young Audiences works-in-progress. The program strives to be a supportive space to nurture and evaluate new TYA scripts, such as **Popularity Coach**. As a part of the conference, **Popularity Coach** was highlighted as a "must-do" activity for NYC families by the *New York Times*.

"**Popularity Coach** has won a series of prestigious opportunities to be shared with the professional theater field. We are excited to present the world premiere of the production with the Omaha community," says Gutschick.

While Guehring may be best known for his adaptations of children's literature (*Sherlock Holmes and the First Baker Street Irregular* and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid* were both popular adaptations authored by Guehring in recent years), **Popularity Coach** offered a unique opportunity for Guehring to create a completely original story for the stage. "I started thinking about what kind of message I would want to share," he says. "As a young person, you get teased for not being like the others, not being an athletically masculine boy or ballet-loving girl. I imagined if we could get to a world where young people don't have gender expectations and expressions, where they could just be whatever they wanted, maybe that would stop the bias and phobia. Maybe that would begin to put an end to the bullying in our world."

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The cast of ***Popularity Coach*** is populated with a variety of local youth talent and Rose students. Rose students Judson Cloudt, Alex Elgert and Artie Shaw take on the roles of Cooper, Mia and Blake, respectively. They are joined by fellow youth actors Grayson Shuler-Morgan, Isabella Orellana-Buendia, Char Pyle and Michael Bassem Bahwawsi. (Rose artist educators Mireya Luna and Elizabeth Peller are joined by guest artists Dani Cleveland and Alfred Ibsen to round out the cast.) In addition, Guehring workshopped the play with a number of The Rose's teen playwriting classes and Teens 'N' Theater participants. The result is a production filled with youthful charm and an authentic youth voice, encouraging young people to accept and love themselves exactly as they are.

"This was such a wonderful opportunity to create something from scratch, but also go use the knowledge that Brian has as someone who has worked directly with young people for many years, his experience directing Pride Players and working with The Rose's Young Playwrights program," says Gutschick. "That time teaching and working with kids our community helped Brian craft a story that is specific to the things kids are dealing with today."

Guehring shares that ***Popularity Coach*** was actually inspired by a friend's child who, in first grade, desperately wanted to be liked by others in his class. "He had become friends with this popular kids in his class, a kid he had nothing in common with and who was the total opposite of who he was and what he liked. It just showed how this idea of needing to be popular starts so young," he says.

The young actors are being directed by an individual who knows firsthand what it means to be a "Rose Kid." Taylor Adams returns to The Rose after many years as a student, performer and teacher, but this time in the new role of the director of ***Popularity Coach***.

"It is really exciting to bring this piece to Omaha audiences," says Adams. "I am most excited to use this piece to tell students that you are perfect, just as you are."

Popularity Coach will be presented Oct. 7 - 23, 2022, with performances Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm and Sundays at 2 pm. An additional performance will be available Saturday, Oct. 8 at 5:30 pm. A sensory-friendly performance will be presented on Saturday, Oct. 9 at 5:30 pm. Interpretation for the Deaf and audio description services for the blind will be offered at the 2 pm show on Saturday, Oct. 15. Children of all ages will enjoy the fun-spirited comedy and heartfelt message in the 75 minute show.

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Tickets for **Popularity Coach** are available for \$25 by calling The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 or online at www.rosetheater.org. Rose members receive four free tickets to the production. Discount ticket vouchers are available at area Hy-Vee stores.

Popularity Coach is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Baird Holm, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.

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 *Van Gogh & Me*, *The Meaning of Maggie*, *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Leo Lionni's Frederick*, *A Palette of Possibility*, *Thumbelina*, *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. It is The Rose's goal to inspire young people to discover the magic of theater, to find their voices and enrich their communities.

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