



## Milwaukee Repertory Theater Expands New Play Development Program with New Commissions, Upcoming World and American Premieres, and a \$1M Gift

**January 22, 2026 at 10amCT (Milwaukee, WI)** – Milwaukee Repertory Theater, one of the nation's first regional theaters and Wisconsin's largest performing arts organization, announces a slate of new commissions, upcoming world and American premieres, and expanded development activity through the **John (Jack) D. Lewis New Play Development Program**, which recently received a transformative **\$1 million gift** from longtime supporters **David Herro and Jay Franke**. Their generosity brings the program's dedicated resources to **\$2 million**, strengthening the commitment of Milwaukee Rep – a pioneer in the regional theater movement – to nurturing the next generation of American theater and expanding the stories represented on the American stage.

Since its launch in 2016, the John (Jack) D. Lewis New Play Development Program has supported world premieres by leading playwrights including **Dael Orlandersmith (twice)**, **Catherine Trieschmann**, **Eleanor Burgess**, **Lloyd Suh**, **Eric Simonson**, **Gordon Gano**, **Idris Goodwin**, **Craig Lucas**, **Daniel Messé**, **Sean Hartley**, **Andrew Bovell**, **Antonio Edwards Suarez**, **Joanna Murray-Smith**, **Mark Clements**, and **Deanie Vallone**. The program's producing-forward model ensures each commission receives sustained artistic support and a clear path from concept to workshop to likely production with an investment in the longevity of new American plays, not just their launch.

"Milwaukee Rep has a responsibility to invest in the future of the American theater," said **Artistic Director Mark Clements**. "New work is the lifeblood of our art form, and these commissions represent our commitment to shepherding bold ideas from first spark to full production—and ultimately out into the national landscape. We're proud to champion artists whose voices will shape the canon for years to come."

Over the next two years, Milwaukee Rep will **produce six new plays** across all three of its stages in the new Associated Bank Theater Center—the Ellen & Joe Checota Powerhouse, Herro-Franke Studio, and Stackner Cabaret. Highlights include the highly anticipated stage adaptation of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Ayad Akhtar's** debut novel **American Dervish**; Milwaukee favorite **Tami Workentin** bringing George Burns and Gracie Allen to life in **George & Gracie: A Love Story**; **Aaron Posner's** **The Cherry Tortured**, a bold reimagining of the Chekhov classic set in Door County, WI; **MKE MVP**, in which **Matt Zembrowski**—playwright of the sold-out hit *Dad's Season Tickets*—charts the Milwaukee Bucks' championship journey through the eyes of the fans; **Katie Bender's** **Instructions for a Séance** receives a Wisconsin specific rewrite from its start at the 2023 Alley All New Festival as a one-woman show that traces Harry Houdini's beginnings in Appleton, WI through a spellbinding blend of illusion, mystery, and personal storytelling; and a new American Premiere of an untitled work by Australian playwright **Andrew Bovell**.

Milwaukee Rep's New Play Development Program has **commissioned** new works from Pulitzer Prize-winner **Ayad Akhtar, Gloria Majule**, who is a recipient of a McDowell Fellowship, a three-time O'Neil finalist and six-time Susan Smith Blackburn Prize nominee and **Nygel D. Robinson** who's recent off-Broadway play *Mexodus* has garnered national attention and returns for a limited run this Spring at the Daryl Roth Theatre. Their new plays will be workshopped and premiere at Milwaukee Rep in an upcoming season along with several other new commissions to be announced soon. The program supports each playwright's full creative development and nurtures their unique voice with a customized, fully-resourced and flexible process tailored to each artist's needs. Led by Artistic Director Mark Clements and Literary Director Annika Perez-Krikorian, Milwaukee Rep's new play development ethos centers on **long-term investment** including—developing, producing, and shepherding plays beyond their first production and into the national landscape. The organization views this as a responsibility to the American theater ecosystem: to champion new voices, expand the canon, and support artists at pivotal moments in their careers.

Recent successes underscore the program's impact, including **Lloyd Suh's *The Heart Sellers***, which won the 2024 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/ATCA Award and has become one of the most produced plays in the country for two consecutive seasons; **Antonio's Song** by **Dael Orlandersmith** and **Antonio Edwards Suarez** premiered at Milwaukee Rep in 2022 before transferring to the Goodman Theatre; the 2023 musical **Run Bambi Run** by Violent Femmes front man Gordon Gano and Eric Simonson was named one of the 10 Best Productions of 2023 by *The Chicago Tribune*'s Chris Jones; **The Craic**, conceived by Mark Clements and Deanie Vallone, has become the all-time best-selling show in the Stackner Cabaret and will return for a second production in the 2026/27 Season for further refinement; and **Things I Know to be True** by Andrew Bovell was optioned by Nicole Kidman for an Amazon series.

## **Additional information on upcoming World and American Premieres, Commissioned New Works, and Additional Development:**

### **World Premiere: *American Dervish* by Ayad Akhtar and Mark Clements**

Based on the debut novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Ayad Akhtar** and co-written with **Mark Clements**, *American Dervish* will workshop in summer 2026 ahead of its anticipated World Premiere in Milwaukee Rep's **2027/28 Season**. Set in Akhtar's hometown of Milwaukee, the piece offers a nuanced and emotionally resonant exploration of faith, identity, and the tensions between tradition and modern life.

### **World Premiere: *George & Gracie: A Love Story* by Tami Workentin**

*Stackner Cabaret, May 2026*

For nearly 40 years, George Burns and Gracie Allen delighted millions as entertainment's original power couple, sharing love and laughter through their comedic brilliance. Now, Milwaukee's own power couple, Jim Pickering and Tami Workentin, bring the inspiring love story of Burns and Allen to life in this heartfelt tribute, filled with theatrical and showbiz magic. Trace George and Gracie's rise from a struggling vaudeville act to the height of stardom during the golden age of radio, television, and film, and celebrate their legacy and devotion in this World Premiere that's sure to captivate and inspire.

**World Premiere: *Cherry Tortured* by Aaron Posner**

*Ellen & Joe Checota Powerhouse, 2026/27 Season*

Audience favorite Aaron Posner (*The Chosen*) returns for the World Premiere of his gloriously funny, brilliantly sharp reimagining of Chekhov's masterpiece, *The Cherry Orchard*. Set in modern-day Door County, one unforgettable family fights for love, legacy, and tradition as the future of their beloved family estate teeters on the edge of change. *The Cherry Tortured* is the latest in Posner's award-winning series of modern Chekhovian adaptations that rank among the most produced plays in the country.

**World Premiere: *MKE MVP* by Matt Zembrowski**

*Stackner Cabaret, 2026/27 Season*

From Matt Zembrowski, creator of the sold-out hit *Dad's Season Tickets*, comes a brand-new musical comedy that celebrates the Milwaukee Bucks' unforgettable road to the Championship as seen through the eyes of five lifelong fans. From the arrival of a franchise-changing MVP in 2013, to the final buzzer in the Summer of 2021, the glorious end of a 50-year wait reveals how one extraordinary season, one electrifying talent, and the exceptional people around us — can make a lasting impact on our lives. Joyful, funny and full of hometown pride, this World Premiere captures the soul of Milwaukee when its team took the world stage.

**Additional Development Production: *Instructions for a Séance* by Katie Bender**

*Herro-Franke Studio, 2026/27 Season*

Step into an unforgettable adventure of mystery, mischief, and messy humanity. Katie Bender transforms the theater into an intimate world of illusion, daring to summon the spirit of Houdini—and wrestles with the chaos of her own life along the way. Equal parts hilarious, haunting, and heartbreakingly honest, this one-woman show fuses memoir and live magic to explore ambition, motherhood, and the craving to break free.

*The New Play Development program also focuses on additional development to plays which have already had a world premiere on a smaller scale by investing time and resources with the playwright to bring their work to a wider audience. First discovered by Literary Director Annika Perez-Krikorian at the Alley All New Festival in 2023, playwright Katie Bender has continued to reimagine the play to unfold in Appleton, Wisconsin, the city where Houdini grew up. Milwaukee Rep's production will be the largest and most ambitious staging of the piece to date.*

**American Premiere: Untitled New Play by Andrew Bovell**

Milwaukee audiences embraced Bovell's work with the American premiere of *Things I Know to Be True* in 2019. This untitled new American premiere is targeted for the 2027/28 Season and will pack a similarly emotional punch.

**New Commissions in Development:*****African Moms' Book Club* by Gloria Majule**

A sharp, comedic drama about four ultra-wealthy Tanzanian women whose monthly book club is upended by the arrival of a young widow returning home from abroad. A workshop is planned for spring 2026.

***The Ballad of John Henry* by Nygel D. Robinson**

A musical re-telling of the legendary American folk hero will start workshops in 2027. Robinson first performed at Milwaukee Rep in *The All Night Strut* (2018) and later contributed original music to the [Rep's Reprise Series](#) during the COVID-19 shutdown. After returning in 2022 for *My Way*, conversations began about developing a new work. His recent off-Broadway breakout, *Mexodus*—a two-man, live-looped hip-hop piece—has garnered national attention.

**Soon to be Announced Title by Ayad Akhtar**

Ayad Akhtar will follow up the World Premiere of *American Dervish* in Milwaukee Rep's 2027/28 Season with a new commission. Details on the new play with Milwaukee ties will be announced soon.

For more information and to learn more about the John (Jack) D. Lewis New Play Development Program, its process, playwrights, and commissions, please visit <https://www.milwaukeerep.com/about/new-play-development/>

###

**About Milwaukee Repertory Theater**

Milwaukee Rep is the largest performing arts organization in Wisconsin. Its new artistic home, the Associated Bank Theater Center, opened Fall 2025 with three unique performance venues—the Ellen & Joe Checota Powerhouse Theater, Herro-Franke Studio Theater, and Stackner Cabaret. For over seven decades, Milwaukee Rep has been a centerpiece of Milwaukee's vibrant arts and cultural scene with productions ranging from Broadway musicals to Shakespeare to American Classics and New Works that are entertaining, inclusive and impactful. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Mark Clements and Executive Director Chad Bauman, Milwaukee Repertory Theater ignites positive change in the cultural, social and economic vitality of its community by creating world-class theater experiences that entertain, provoke and inspire meaningful dialogue among an audience representative of Milwaukee's rich diversity. More information visit [www.MilwaukeeRep.com](http://www.MilwaukeeRep.com)

**Media Contact:** Frances White, Director of Media Relations

[fwhite@milwaukeerep.com](mailto:fwhite@milwaukeerep.com) | cell 414-803-7657

[www.MilwaukeeRep.com](http://www.MilwaukeeRep.com) | @MilwRep | #WeRepMilwaukee