



THE  
**ABSOLUTE  
BRIGHTNESS**  
OF LEONARD PELKEY

BY JAMES LECESNE



**BACKSTAGE** GUIDE

A publication of **COMMUNITY SERVICE** at  
**AMERICAN BLUES THEATER**

## BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

# THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY

Written by James Lecezne

Directed by Kurt Johns

## STARRING



Joe Foust\*

Ensemble member Joe Foust\* portrays every character in a small Jersey Shore town as he unravels the story of Leonard Pelkey, a tenaciously optimistic and flamboyant fourteen-year old boy who goes missing. A luminous force of nature whose magic is only truly felt once he is gone, Leonard becomes an unexpected inspiration as the town's citizens question how they live, who they love, and what they leave behind. *L.A. Times* says it "shines with humanity".

*\* Ensemble member of American Blues Theater*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Note from Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside .....Page 4

About Playwright James Lecesne .....Page 5

“The Backstory” with Joe Foust .....Page 5

Interview with Director Kurt Johns .....Page 6

Design Research & Vision from Costume Designer Travis Bihn .....Page 7

About The Trevor Project .....Pages 8-9

About Matthew Shepard .....Pages 10-11

The Rising Number of Hate Crimes Since 2016 .....Pages 12-13

How to be an Ally & Friend .....Pages 14-15

About the It Gets Better Project .....Pages 16-17

About American Blues Theater .....Pages 18-19

## **BACKSTAGE** Contributors

Elyse Dolan  
Associate Producer  
American Blues Theater

with Gwendolyn Whiteside, Joe Foust,  
Kurt Johns, and Travis Bihn



## NOTE FROM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE**



Artistic Director  
Gwendolyn Whiteside

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 You’ll meet a tough detective, a withdrawn teenage girl, a brusque yet gentle hairdresser, and many other intriguing characters as they join forces to solve a mystery.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* that 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.”

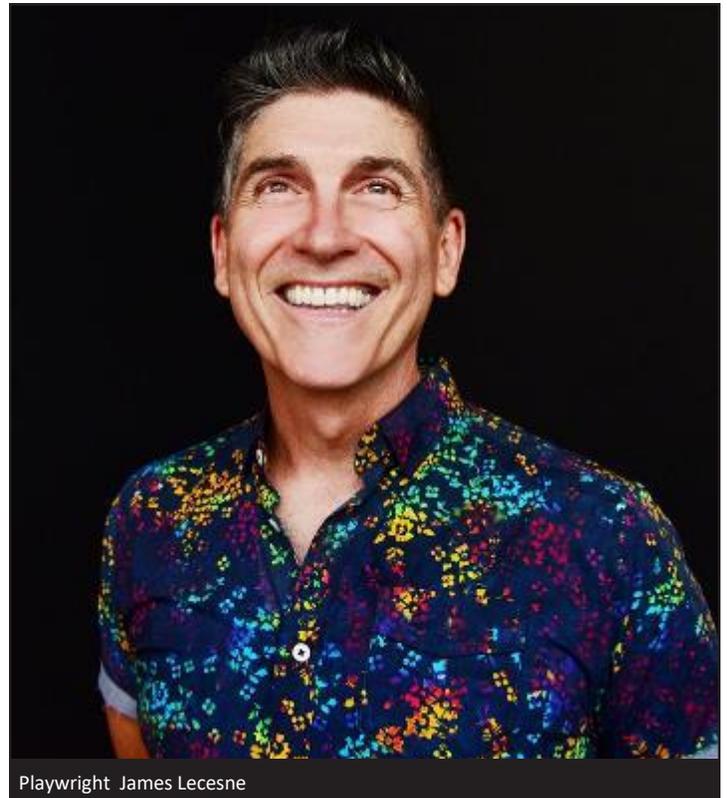
May the story of Leonard Pelkey inspire you – accept, protect, love. •



Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside addresses the crowd at the 2015 *Ripped: The Living Newspaper Festival*

## ABOUT PLAYWRIGHT JAMES LECESNE

James Lecesne 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*. •



Playwright James Lecesne

American Blues Theater Ensemble member Joe Foust is the Solo Performer in *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*. We asked Joe to share some lesser-known facts about himself in “The Backstory.”



Actor Joe Foust

**If I weren’t an actor:**

[I’d do] something still in theatre that I already do: playwright, director or fight choreographer

**Best career advice I’ve received:**

“No one wants to work with an a\*\*clown.”

**Favorite part of the job:**

Almost all of it

**Worst part of the job:**

Memorizing

**Favorite item of clothing:**

Pajama jeans

**What I’d want for my last meal:**

Lou Malnati’s deep dish Lou. Hash browns with truffle cheese. Bang Bang biscuit. Nori sushi. Palak paneer with raita. Maddie Bird Bakery (RIP) salted caramel cupcake. Tawny port. Angels’ Envy bourbon.

**If I could invent one thing:**

Nanotechnology that makes the human body perfectly healthy and beautiful

**One of my hidden talents:**

Whistling and humming at the same time in harmony •

# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR **KURT JOHNS**

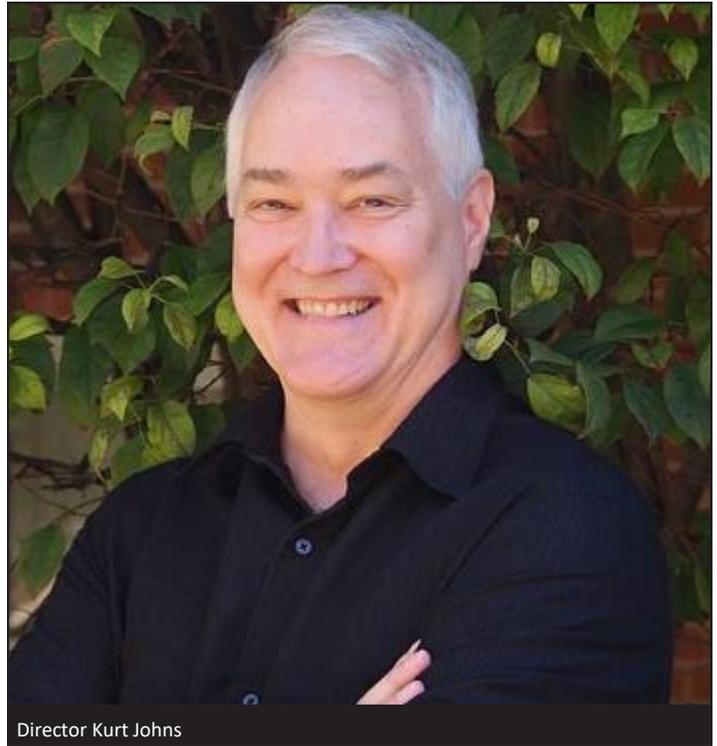
Associate Producer Elyse Dolan discusses *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey* with Director Kurt Johns.

## **What excites you about this project?**

I'm excited to work with American Blues for the first time. I'm grateful to Wendy for giving *Absolute Brightness* and me this opportunity. I'm so glad to be working with Joe Foust, who seemed fated to play "Chuck", and the creative team we've put together. The play itself is a parable, a detective story, and a challenge. It summons us to bear witness to a mystery, which begins with a disappearance and proceeds as the people of a small town feel their loss of a gentle and creative non-conformist spirit. I'm excited because Chicago has never seen this play before. I hope they'll find it as funny, tragic, and healing as I did.

## **How is directing on a solo show different than directing a show with a larger cast?**

Directing a solo show is really coaching a 90 minute monologue. I mean, besides the physical blocking of the show, I, as a director, need to "orchestrate" the actor's and the audience's journey through the story. Sometimes that "duty" is to regulate the physical and emotional energy expenditure of the actor to attune with the audience's capacity to listen, absorb, and react.



Director Kurt Johns

Often in a multi-actor show, the entrance of a new character will bring new information, new energy, or new focus or direction. In a solo play one actor must do that alone, especially if that actor is embodying different characters in the play to tell their parts of the story. Most importantly, I believe it is my job to help navigate the actor's train of thought, that is what motivates each new turn in the story, new character, new information, so that the actor is always sure of their footing and consequently the audience knows which part of the story is happening at any given moment.

## **Why is it important to tell this story now?**

I think with the current state of our country, good people are getting drowned out by intolerance, prejudice and bigotry. I, being a child of the 60s thought that we'd evolved toward a kinder, gentler, smarter nation. But alas, it seems that I was living in a liberal bubble and now it so often seems that the biggest voices are the most small minded. Plays like *Absolute Brightness* can remind us of our humanity, our community, and the need for simple kindness and acceptance. To quote Chuck DeSantis, "I figure there'll always be shit in the shadows, but it's better for me to try to live in the light..."

## **What will you be working on next?**

My next project is a play which I co-authored with Gail Rastorfer, my writing partner, called *HELLO KITTY MUST DIE*. It is a world premiere transgressive darkly comedic solo play, based on the cult indie novel by Angela S. Choi. "Fiona Yu", the main character, is a 30 year old Chinese-American lawyer who impersonates her parents, her dates, her bosses as she relates her accidental reunion with her long lost childhood friend, "Sean". While other young men work on their cars, cook, or play video games, "Sean" kills people. *HELLO KITTY MUST DIE* is a deliciously twisted tale of family, murder, and arranged dating. After invited readings here and in LA, I am making trips to New York City to pitch this play to producers there. We are having a New York industry reading sponsored by Davenport Theatrical Enterprises which is coming soon. •

# DESIGN RESEARCH AND VISION FROM COSTUME DESIGNER TRAVIS BIHN

Costume Designer Travis Bihn shares his vision for the costumes in *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, as well as some of his preliminary research images.

## “We're all ghosts. We all carry, inside us, people who came before us” - *The Cloud Atlas*

I'll be using this quote as inspiration to style our Solo Performer (Joe Foust), in his attempt to embody the souls that came before us. There are a total of nine different souls/characters he embodies: Chuck DeSantis, Marty Branahan, Ellen Hertle, Phoebe Hertle, Buddy Howard, Gloria Salzano, Marion Tochterman, Otto Beckerman, and Travis Lembeck.

### A costume that says nothing in order for an actor's action to say everything

Joe must effortlessly transform (both physically and mentally) into a different character at a drop of a hat, and so his “base costume” must be muted to help elevate his actions. His “base costume” will feature neutral tones with a clean, modern silhouette, allowing for total transformation.

The only element of color will be the small, multicolored pocket square in his jacket to symbolize the beautiful life force of Leonard Pelkey that is the heartbeat that flows throughout the entire performance

He must take on the role of “ghost of the past” through his costume, in order to become these characters through small additions of accessories.

Due to the quick nature of the character transformations, complete costume changes are not possible. Limiting the size/amount of these accessories will also keep the tone more serious, and less farce-like. •



Research examples for the “base costume” featuring: a light gray plaid blazer that can be removed or buttoned to change characters, darker dress pants, lighter patterned dress shirt, black dress shoes, and a multicolored pocket square to symbolize the life force of Leonard Pelkey.

### Examples of small accessories to add to base costume to symbolize a character:



Marion Tochterman



Otto Beckerman



Chuck DeSantis/  
Marty Branahan



Ellen Hertle



Gloria Salzano

# ABOUT THE TREVOR PROJECT

James Lecesne—the playwright of *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*—is also a co-founder of The Trevor Project.

Founded in 1998 by the creators of the Academy Award-winning short film *TREVOR*, The Trevor Project is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people.

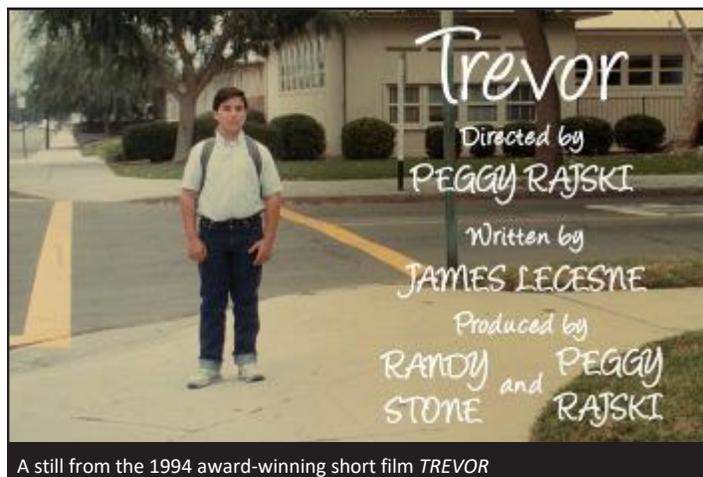
In 1994, producers Peggy Rajski and Randy Stone saw writer/performer James Lecesne bring to life Trevor, a character he created as part of his award-winning one-man show *Word of Mouth*. Convinced Trevor's story would make a wonderful short film, Stone and Rajski invited Lecesne to adapt it into a screenplay.

The Oscar-winning film eventually launched a national movement. When producer Randy Stone secured an airing on HBO with Ellen DeGeneres hosting, director/producer Peggy Rajski discovered there was no real place for young people like Trevor to turn when facing challenges similar to his. She quickly recruited mental health experts and figured out how to build the infrastructure necessary for a nationwide 24-hour crisis line, and writer James Lecesne secured the funds to start it. On the night their funny and moving coming-of-age story premiered on HBO in 1998, these visionary filmmakers launched the Trevor Lifeline, the first national crisis intervention and suicide prevention lifeline for LGBTQ youth.

Since then, hundreds of thousands of young people in crisis have reached out to The Trevor Project's multiple in-person and online life-saving, life-affirming resources.

The mission of The Trevor Project is to end suicide among LGBTQ young people. The organization works to fulfill this mission through four strategies:

1. **Provide crisis counseling** to LGBTQ young people thinking of suicide.
2. **Offer resources, supportive counseling and a sense of community** to LGBTQ young people to reduce the risk that they become suicidal.
3. **Educate** young people and adults who interact with young people on LGBTQ-competent suicide prevention, risk detection and response.
4. **Advocate** for laws and policies that will reduce suicide among LGBTQ young people.



Some of the programs & services offered by The Trevor Project include:

## Crisis Interventions

- ◆ **Trevor Lifeline**—The only national 24/7 crisis intervention and suicide prevention lifeline for LGBTQ young people under 25, available at 1-866-488-7386.
- ◆ **TrevorChat**—A free, confidential, secure instant messaging service for LGBTQ youth that provides live help from trained volunteer counselors, open daily.
- ◆ **TrevorText**—A free, confidential, secure service in which LGBTQ young people can text a trained Trevor counselor for support and crisis intervention, available daily by texting START to 678678.

## Suicide Prevention Trainings and Resources

- ◆ **Trevor Lifeguard Workshop**—The Lifeguard Workshop is a free online learning module based on The Trevor Project's in-person workshop, which is listed in the SPRC/AFSP Best Practice Registry for Suicide Prevention. The Lifeguard Workshop webpage includes a video, a curriculum guide, lesson plans, and additional resources for educators.
- ◆ **Trevor CARE Training**—This training for adults provides an introduction to suicide prevention techniques based on Trevor's CARE model (Connect, Accept, Respond, Empower).
- ◆ **Trevor Ally Training**—This training introduces adults to

the unique needs of LGBTQ youth.

- ◆ **LGBTQ on Campus**—These online, interactive training simulations for students and faculty in higher education are AFSP/SPRC Best Practices for Suicide Prevention and were created in partnership with Kognito Interactive and Campus Pride.
- ◆ **Step-In, Speak-Up**—These online, interactive training simulations for faculty and staff working with youth in Grades 6–12 are AFSP/SPRC Best Practices for Suicide Prevention and were created in partnership with Kognito Interactive.
- ◆ **Model School District Policy for Suicide Prevention**—A roadmap to help school leaders easily navigate ways to bring suicide prevention policies and resources to their schools, developed in collaboration with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association of School Psychologists.
- ◆ **Coming Out As YOU!**—A pocket-sized guide to inspire critical thinking in youth who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- ◆ **Trevor Support Center** – A resource where LGBTQ youth and their allies can find answers to frequently asked questions, and explore resources related to sexual orientation, gender identity and more.

## Community Resources

- ◆ **TrevorSpace**—A social networking community for LGBTQ youth ages 13 through 24 and their friends and allies.
- ◆ **Trevor Ambassadors**—Local volunteer groups in select U.S. cities (Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington D.C.)
- ◆ **Trevor NextGen**—Groups of young, motivated volunteers in New York and Los Angeles who raise awareness, develop leadership, advocate, and fundraise in support of The Trevor Project’s life-saving, life-affirming work.
- ◆ **Trevor Youth Advisory Council**—This group of 20 young advocates, ages 16–24 from around the country, are trained by The Trevor Project to raise awareness about LGBTQ youth, mental health, and suicide prevention in their communities.
- ◆ **Trevor Advocacy Network**—A way for Trevor supporters to take action to improve policies and legislation that protect LGBTQ youth.

If you are thinking about suicide, you deserve immediate support. Please call The Trevor Lifeline at 1-866-488-7386. •



Supporters of The Trevor Project at the 2007 Washington D.C. Pride Parade

## ABOUT **MATTHEW SHEPARD**

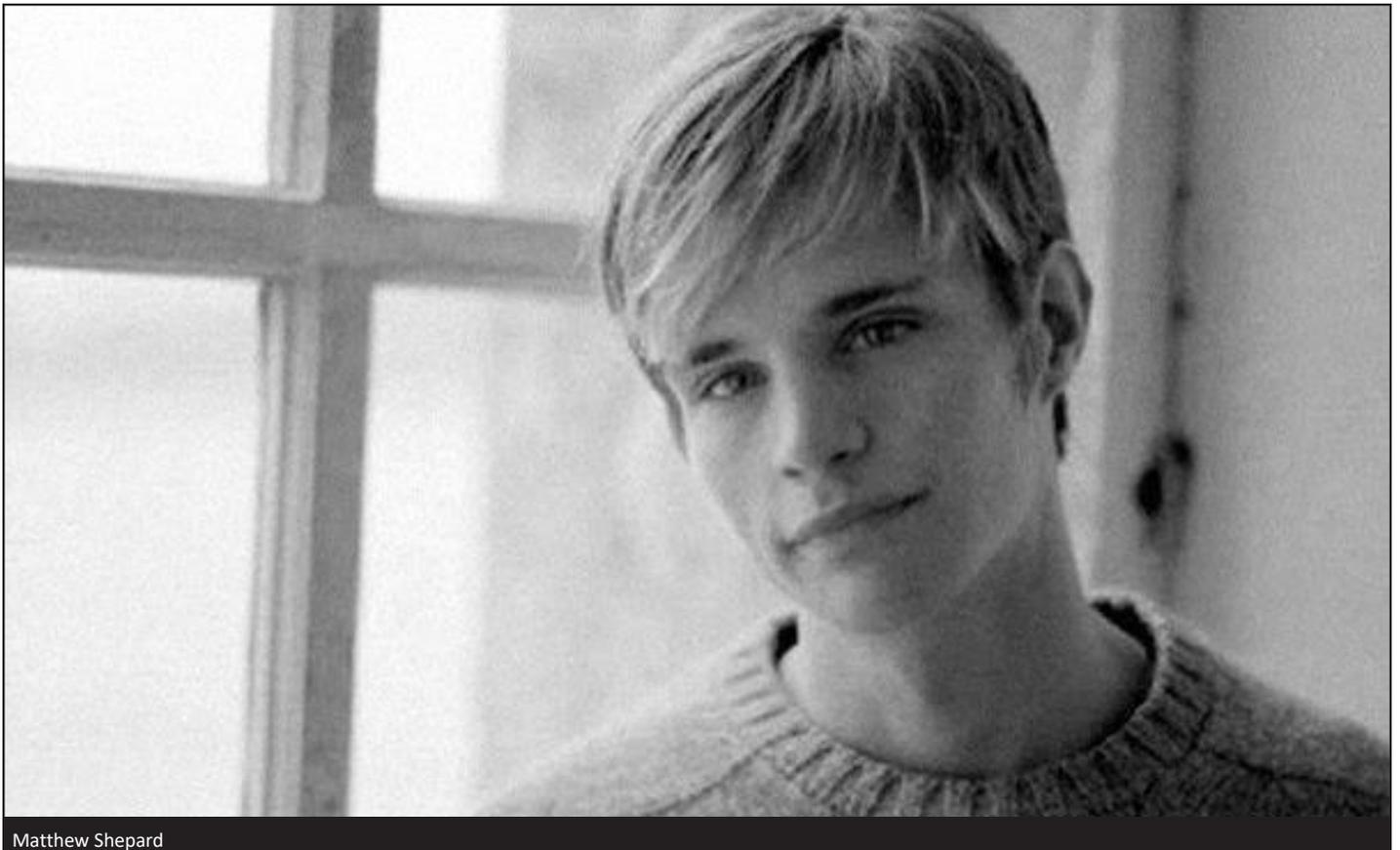
The story of “Leonard Pelkey” is reminiscent of that of Matthew Shepard — the victim of a 1998 hate crime that led to a national conversation about hate crimes and LGBTQ issues.

Matthew Shepard was born in 1976 in Casper, Wyoming to Judy and Dennis Shepard. In 1998, Shepard became a first-year political science major at the University of Wyoming in Laramie with a minor in languages, and was chosen as the student representative for the Wyoming Environmental Council.

On the night of October 6, 1998, Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson at the Fireside Lounge in Laramie; all three men were in their early 20s. McKinney and Henderson decided to give Shepard a ride home. They subsequently drove to a remote, rural area, and proceeded to rob, pistol-whip, and torture Shepard, tie him to a fence, set him afire and left him to die.

Still tied to the fence, Shepard was in a coma eighteen hours after the attack when he was discovered by Aaron Kreifels, a cyclist who initially mistook Shepard for a scarecrow. Reggie Fluty, the first police officer to arrive at the scene, found Shepard alive but covered in blood.

Shepard was transported first to Iverson Memorial Hospital in Laramie before being moved to the more advanced trauma ward at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. He had suffered fractures to the back of his head and in front of his right ear. He experienced severe brainstem damage, which affected his body's ability to regulate his heart rate, body temperature, and other vital functions. There were also about a dozen small lacerations around his head, face, and neck. His injuries were deemed too severe for doctors to operate. Shepard never regained consciousness and remained on full life support.



Matthew Shepard

While he lay in intensive care and in the days following the attack, candlelight vigils were held around the world. Shepard was pronounced dead six days after the attack at 12:53 a.m. on October 12, 1998. He was 21.

## Trial & Sentencing

Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were arrested shortly after the attack and charged with first-degree murder following Shepard's death. Significant media coverage was given to the killing and to what role Shepard's sexual orientation played as a motive in the crime.

The prosecutor argued that McKinney's murder of Shepard was premeditated and driven by greed. McKinney's lawyer attempted to put forward a gay panic defense, arguing that McKinney was driven to temporary insanity by alleged sexual advances by Shepard. This defense was rejected by the judge. Both McKinney and Henderson were convicted of the murder, and each received two consecutive life sentences.

## Legacy

Following her son's murder, Judy Shepard became a prominent LGBTQ rights activist and established the Matthew Shepard Foundation. Shepard's death inspired films, novels, plays, songs, and other works, including *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project.

Shepard's murder brought national and international attention to hate crime legislation at the state and federal levels. In October 2009, the United States Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (commonly the "Matthew Shepard Act" or "Shepard/Byrd Act" for short), and on October 28, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the legislation into law.

On October 26, 2018, Shepard's ashes were interred at the crypt of Washington National Cathedral nearly 20 years after his death. The ceremony was presided over by the first openly gay Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson, and the Bishop of Washington Reverend Marianne Edgar Budde. His was the first interment of the ashes of a national figure at the cathedral since Helen Keller's fifty years earlier. •



President Barack Obama greets Louvon Harris, left, Betty Byrd Boatner, right, both sisters of James Byrd, Jr., and Judy Shepard, center, mother of Matthew Shepard, following his remarks on the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act on October 28, 2009.

## THE RISING NUMBER OF HATE CRIMES SINCE 2016

The below article by Julie Zauzmer and Terrence McCoy—entitled “D.C. Hate Crimes Nearly Double Since 2016, with LGBTQ Community the Biggest Target”—originally appeared in *The Washington Post* on February 2, 2019. It has been edited here for length.

The number of hate crimes in [Washington D.C.] rose sharply in 2018, nearly doubling the total [number of hate crimes] just two years earlier, according to city statistics.

Crimes based on sexual orientation topped the list, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, a research center at California State University at San Bernardino. The center analyzed the rise in hate crimes in cities across the nation in its annual report on bias crimes.

“D.C. is at an all-time high,” said Brian Levin, the professor who led the research study. The District logged 209 hate crimes in 2018, up from 179 in 2017, 107 in 2016, and 66 in 2015. Of the 20 largest cities Levin analyzed, all but four saw an uptick in hate crimes from 2017 to 2018, and the District’s two-year rise was among the most significant.

City leaders responded to the data with concern. Mónica Palacio, who heads the District’s Office of Human Rights, said the surge in hate crimes is a difficult problem for the city to solve, with national politics driving the rise in hate and, she suspects, some of the actors coming from outside of the city.

“In the District, we’re somewhat of a national target, right? If somebody spray-paints a symbol of hate or hangs a symbol of hate in the District, the echo effect is much larger,” she said. “I think the mayor puts out a very strong statement about our values as a city: inclusion, respect, peaceful coexistence, respect for people’s life choices, for who they love and how they pray. Those values are a powerful statement that we as a District stand for these beliefs.”

Hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity accounted for nearly half of the city’s total hate crimes in 2018. The District recorded 61 crimes in 2018 based on sexual orientation, up from 40 in 2016 and 56 in 2017 (an increase of more than 50% over two years). That was followed by 49 crimes based on ethnicity, up from 13 in 2016 and 40 in 2017 (an increase of more than 300% in two years) and 39 based on race, up from 13 in 2016 and 47 in 2017 (also a 300% increase in two years). The District also logged 36 crimes based on gender identity, up from 19 in 2016 and 13 in 2017 (more than 50% higher in 2018 than two years ago); and 12 based on religion, a 33% decrease from 2016’s 18 crimes and the same as 2017.

Stephania Mahdi, the co-chair of the DC Anti-Violence Project, which focuses on violence against the LGBTQ community, said the rise in crimes based on sexuality and gender identity has been apparent to her. Her organization offers free mental health counseling to victims of violence; so many victims have sought that support recently that the group has hired a second social worker. “The political climate doesn’t help. We are backtracking as a country, when it comes to how we respect and view and talk about and talk with the LGBTQ community,” she said. “You see a rise in anti-LGBTQ policies on the national level. That all adds into this climate where we’re seeing people feeling more vulnerable than they may have ever felt before.”

D.C. police also reported 10 crimes based on political affiliation in 2017 and 11 crimes in 2018, after tallying just zero, one or two crimes per year from 2011 through 2016. Levin noted that the District is one of the few cities in the country that counts political affiliation as a basis for hate crimes, alongside more common categories like anti-black, anti-Latino, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and anti-gay crimes.

“We’re entrenched in [political] polarization now, more so than we’ve been in decades. Conflicts are not just being divided along racial and ethnic lines, but we’re also seeing these political conflicts taking place that end up in violence,” Levin said. “It’s creating a new hate crime, based on politics.”

A D.C. police lieutenant said he believes the higher number of hate crimes overall is attributable, in part, to residents’ increased awareness...that they can report such incidents to police. In addition, he said, every D.C. police officer was trained on bias crimes in 2015, and may have since become better at properly reporting incidents.

“The science of reporting is tricky. The more aggressively you try to prevent an activity, sometimes the more people report on it,” the D.C. Office of Human Rights’ Palacio said.

But both Palacio and the police lieutenant, as well as outside experts who study hate crimes, said they believe it is not just an increase in reporting — a larger volume of hate crimes simply seem to be occurring.

Many of the cities in the study use different criteria to report their data. Some, like Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, Portland, Ore., and Louisville, break down racially

motivated crimes by the race of the victim. Anti-black violence was the most common type of hate crime in 2018 in all of those cities. Crimes motivated by race or ethnicity, less specifically, were the top type of hate crime in Houston, Philadelphia and San Francisco, while crimes motivated by bias against gay men and lesbians were the most common type in Seattle and Sacramento, and the second-most-common type in cities that included Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and San Francisco.

Crimes against Jews were also common — the third-most-common type in Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston, which are the second-, third- and fourth-most-populous cities in the nation, respectively. In the most populous city (with by far the largest Jewish population), New York City, anti-Semitic crimes were more than four times as common as any other type of hate crime in the city: a total of 189 crimes during the year.

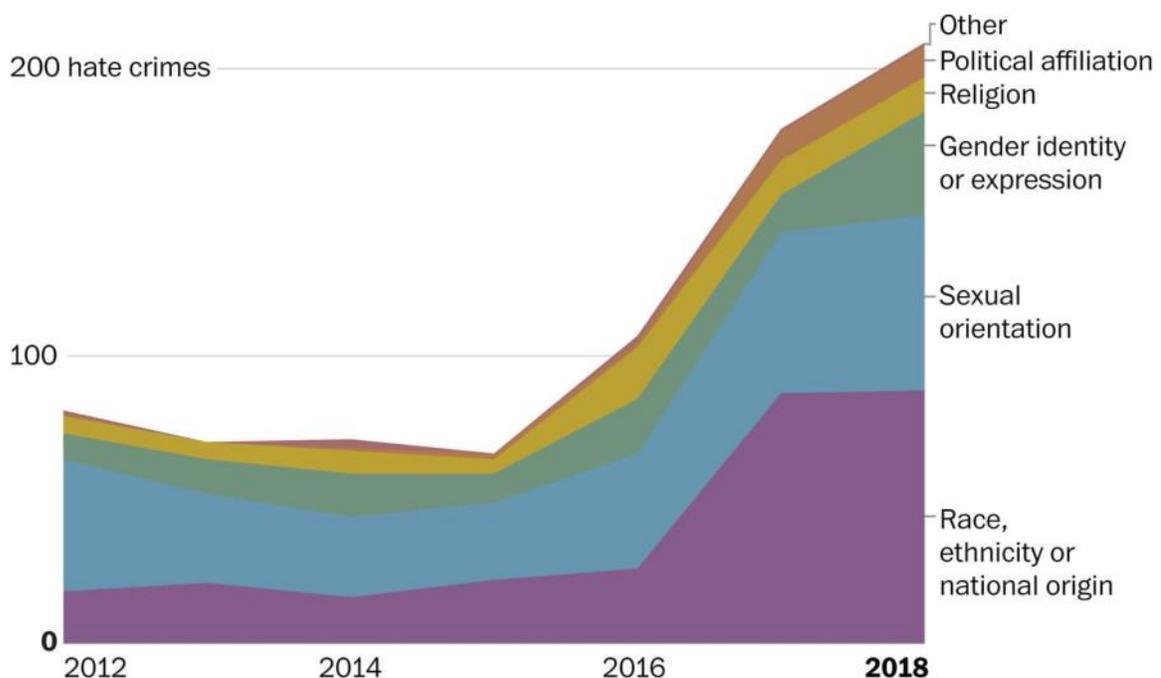
“What we see with people who commit hate crimes, they don’t specialize in one group. They feel that there are people who shouldn’t be here and they’d like to get rid of them from our communities, and they will attack anyone,” said Jack McDevitt, the director of the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University in Boston. “They may go looking for someone who’s Latino, and if they don’t find someone, they’ll look for someone who’s Jewish. All groups appear to be experiencing increases.”

McDevitt blamed the increase on multiple factors, including heated words about immigrants and minorities from political leaders. “This is heard by some haters as permission to go ahead and act,” he said. He added that the ease of finding hateful beliefs online can fuel people to act violently.

James Nolan, a West Virginia University sociologist who studies hate crimes, said he found this study’s results convincing, although hate crimes are difficult to track and often inconsistently categorized. “We found this basically everywhere. Hate crimes are up for the country. And it really corresponds with the heated political rhetoric around the 2016 election,” he said.

The Rev. Thomas Bowen, the director of the D.C. mayor’s Office of Religious Affairs, said that as the number of hate crimes in the city climbed, he has developed a protocol for responding when a vulnerable religious or racial community is targeted. He makes sure, for example, that it is not just graffiti that gets cleaned up when a house of worship is vandalized; police officers and civic volunteers stop by to talk with congregants to ensure they feel safe.

“These incidents definitely do not reflect on who we are as the District of Columbia, and it definitely doesn’t reflect on a majority of residents in Washington, D.C. . . . What we value is love and our neighbors,” Bowen said. •



This graph from *The Washington Post* illustrates the number of annual hate crimes by category in Washington D.C. Source: Metropolitan Police Department

## HOW TO BE AN ALLY & FRIEND

For a lot of people, learning that someone they know and care about is LGBTQ can open a range of emotions, from confused to concerned to awkward to honored. It may be hard to know how to react, leaving you with questions about what to say, how to talk about being LGBTQ, and wanting to know what you can do to be supportive.

An “ally” is a term used to describe someone who is supportive of LGBTQ people. It encompasses non-LGBTQ allies as well as those within the LGBTQ community who support each other, such as a lesbian who is an ally to the bisexual community.

From the Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD, here are several ways you can be an LGBTQ ally and friend:

- ◆ **Be a listener.**
- ◆ **Be honest:** It’s important to be honest with yourself — acknowledging your feelings and coming to terms with them. And it means being honest with the person who came out in your life — acknowledging you aren’t an expert, asking them what’s important to them, seeking resources to better understand the realities of being an LGBTQ individual so that you can be truly informed and supportive.
- ◆ **Be open-minded.**
- ◆ **Be willing to talk.**
- ◆ **Send gentle signals:** Showing and sharing your acceptance and support can be very easy. Many people often don’t realize that LGBTQ people keep watch for signs from their friends, family and acquaintances about whether it is safe to be open with them. It can be as subtle as having an LGBTQ-themed book on your coffee table.



- ◆ **Be inclusive.**
- ◆ **Don't assume anything about anyone's sexual orientation:** Someone close to you could be looking for support in their coming-out process. Not making assumptions will give them the space they need.
- ◆ **Let your support inform your decisions:** It's about working to develop a true understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ in America and trying to do your part to help break down the walls of prejudice and discrimination that still exist — for example, by supporting businesses with appropriate anti-discrimination policies, saying you don't appreciate "humor" that demeans LGBTQ people when it happens, or learning about where political candidates stand on issues that have an impact on the LGBTQ community.
- ◆ **Confront your own prejudices and bias,** even if it is uncomfortable to do so.
- ◆ **Be reassuring:** Explain to a someone who came out to you that their sexual orientation or gender identity has not changed how you feel about them, but it might take a little while for you to digest what they have told you. You still care for and respect them as much as you ever have or more. And that you want to do right by them and that you welcome them telling you if anything you say or do is upsetting.
- ◆ **Have courage:** Just as it takes courage for LGBTQ people to be open and honest about who they are, it also takes courage to support your LGBTQ friends or loved ones. We live in a society where prejudice still exists and where discrimination is still far too common. Recognizing these facts and giving your support to that person will take your relationship to a higher level and is a small step toward a better and more accepting world.
- ◆ **Believe that all people, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, should be treated with dignity and respect.** •



## ABOUT THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT

Like The Trevor Project, the It Gets Better Project was created to help LGBTQ youth who are struggling with suicidal thoughts and bullying.

It Gets Better is an Internet-based nonprofit founded by gay activist, author, media pundit, and journalist Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller in 2010 in response to the suicides of teenagers who were bullied because they were gay or because their peers suspected that they were gay. Its goal is to prevent suicide among LGBTQ youth by having LGBTQ adults and allies convey the message that these teens' lives will improve.

The project was founded by Savage in response to the suicide of Billy Lucas and other teenagers who were bullied because they were gay or perceived to be, such as with Raymond Chase, Tyler Clementi, Ryan Halligan, Asher Brown, and Seth Walsh. Savage wrote, "I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes. I wish I could have told Billy that it gets better. I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, it gets better."

In September 2010, they launched their YouTube channel. A one-hour special aired on February 21, 2012, hosted by Savage. A second hour long "It Gets Better" special was aired on both MTV and Logo networks on October 9, 2012.

The project has grown rapidly: over 200 videos were uploaded in the first week, and the project's YouTube channel reached the 650 video limit in the next week. The project is now organized on its own website, the It Gets Better Project, and includes more than 60,000 entries from people of all sexual orientations, including many celebrities. The videos have received over 50 million views.

The It Gets Better Project fulfills its mission to uplift, empower, and connect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth around the globe in two ways:

- ◆ **Storytelling.** The It Gets Better Project connects young LGBTQ people with the global LGBTQ community by



The screenshot shows the homepage of the It Gets Better Project website. At the top, the logo "IT GETS BETTER PROJECT" is displayed in white and yellow text, with the website URL "WWW.ITGETSBETTERPROJECT.COM" below it. A navigation bar includes links for "NEWEST", "POPULAR", and "SUBMIT YOUR OWN VIDEO >". On the right, there is a search bar with the text "Find Videos" and a yellow "SEARCH" button. The main content area features a large video player in the center, titled "President Obama: It Gets Better", showing a video of President Barack Obama. The video player has a play button and a progress bar showing "0:00 / 3:06". Below the video player, the text "President Obama: It Gets Better | WATCH ON YOUTUBE" is visible. The video player is surrounded by a grid of smaller video thumbnails, each showing a different person's face. To the right of the main video player, there is a vertical column of more video thumbnails. The overall layout is clean and organized, with a focus on showcasing user-generated content.

A screenshot from the It Gets Better website, featuring the video contributed by President Barack Obama

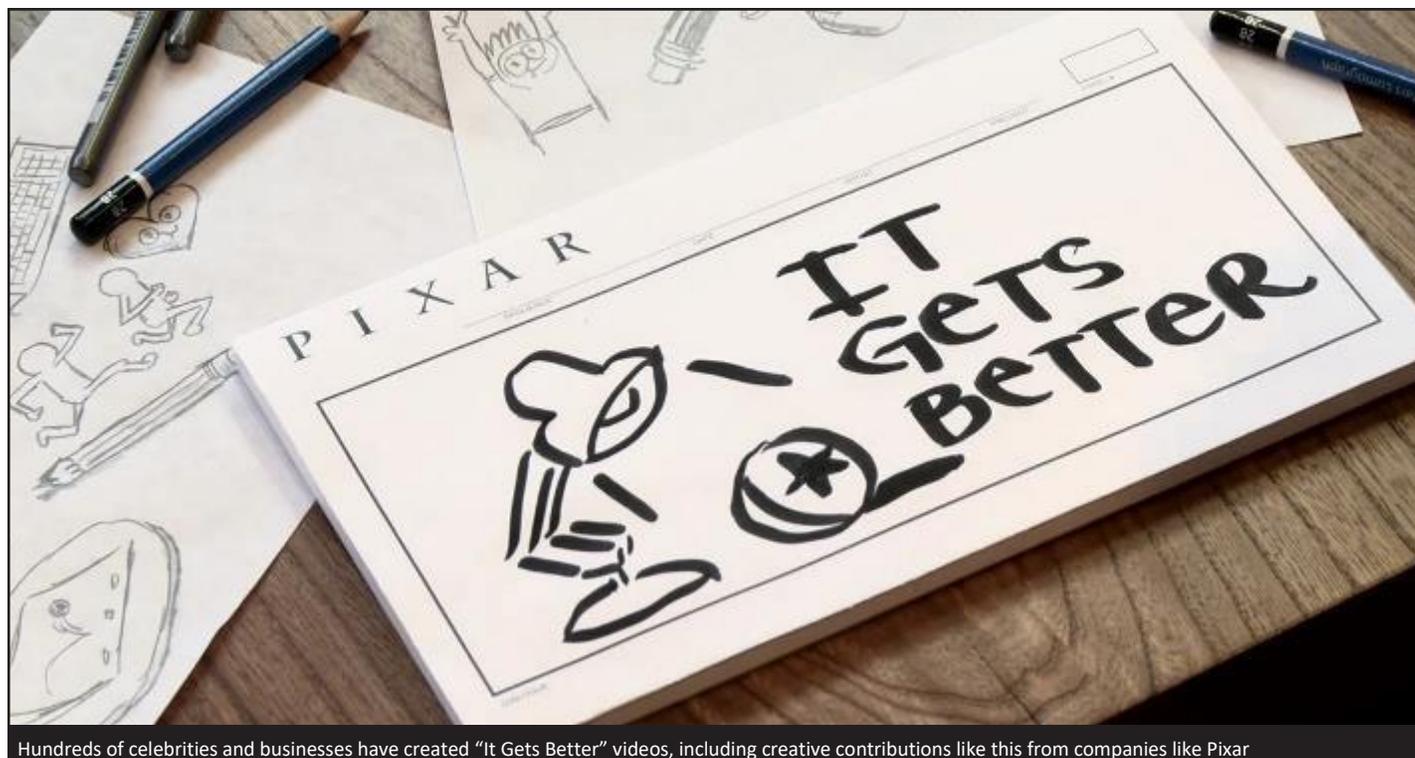
providing access to an arsenal of uplifting and inspiring stories of hope, resilience, and determination, as told by members of the LGBTQ community and their allies.

- ◆ **Building community.** The It Gets Better Project builds community both internationally and locally by (a) cultivating a growing network of international affiliates (located in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, India, Italy, Mexico, Moldova, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Russia, United Kingdom, Spain, and Switzerland) that have embraced the It Gets Better Project's mission to support LGBTQ youth in their home countries, (b) engaging with young LGBTQ people both on and offline, and (c) connecting them to local community service providers that can provide on-the-ground assistance.

The project was given the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Governor's Award at the 64th Primetime Creative Arts Emmy Awards for "strategically, creatively and powerfully utilizing the media to educate and inspire," according to the academy's chairman and CEO Bruce Rosenblum.

In March 2011, *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, a book of essays edited by Dan Savage and Terry Miller on the same theme as the web video project, was released. It contains more than 100 essays, some transcribed or expanded from the videos, and others original. Contributors include Jennifer Finney Boylan, Gregory Maguire, Meshell Ndegeocello, Michael Cunningham, Suze Orman, and David Sedaris.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama lent his voice to the movement against bullying and contributed a video on October 21, 2010, saying, "We've got to dispel this myth that bullying is just a normal rite of passage; that it's just some inevitable part of growing up. It's not. We have an obligation to ensure that our schools are safe for all of our kids. And for every young person out there you need to know that if you're in trouble, there are caring adults who can help." In March 2011, Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hosted an anti-bullying conference. •



Hundreds of celebrities and businesses have created "It Gets Better" videos, including creative contributions like this from companies like Pixar

# ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

## AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

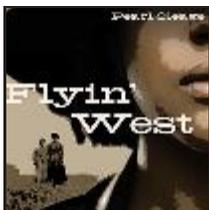
Winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves.

Our diverse and multi-generational 36-member Ensemble has nearly 600 combined years of collaboration on stage. As of 2018, our theater and artists have 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.

For over thirty years, American Blues has created essential productions and live theatrical experiences for Chicagoland. Their best known production is Chicago's holiday tradition *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!* that has entertained over 50,000 patrons since 2002! Terry Teachout of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote American Blues is "exceptional" and the company "feels like home." Chris Jones of *Chicago Tribune* claimed Blues is "strikingly honest [with] deep emotional souls."

In addition to first-class theater, American Blues Theater believes it is an honor and duty to serve the community. They provide an integrated arts education program to Chicago Public Schools that serves approximately 3,000 students annually. They hold "Pediatric Previews" which donates a portion of box office sales to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. They donate thousands of complimentary tickets to underserved communities. They provide community engagement events called "Town Halls" for patrons following Sunday matinee performance, including curated discussions with Northwestern University psychologists. As a Blue Star Theater, they honor military service and first-responders through various initiatives. Former President of Illinois Labor History Society, Larry Spivak wrote, "American Blues is a dynamic force in Chicago – connecting culture, art, history, and politics into a holistic, aesthetic experience." •

## SEASON 33 "Home Sweet Home"



by Pearl Cleage

Directed by  
Chuck Smith\*

Oct 5 - Nov 3, 2018



from Frank Capra's film

Directed by  
Gwendolyn Whiteside\*

Music direction by  
Michael Mahler\*

Nov 15, '18 - Jan 5, '19

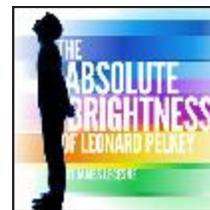


by Steven Dietz

*Chicago premiere*

Directed by  
Halena Kays

Feb 1 - Mar 16, 2019



by James Lecesne

*Chicago premiere*

Directed by  
Kurt Johns

Mar 29 - Apr 27, 2019



by James Valeq &  
Fred Alley

Directed by  
Tammy Mader

Music direction by  
Malcolm Ruhl

July 12 - Aug 17, 2019

\*Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater

# ABOUT **AMERICAN BLUES THEATER**

## **IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE THEATER**

### **PERFORMANCE VENUE**

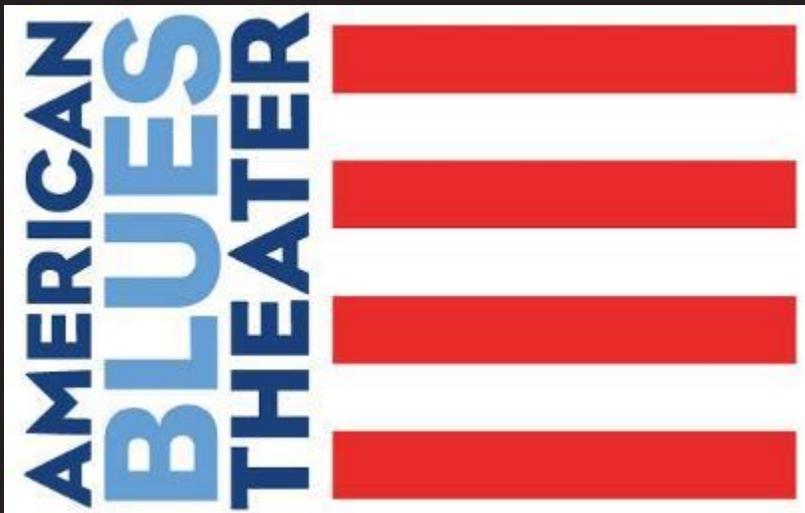
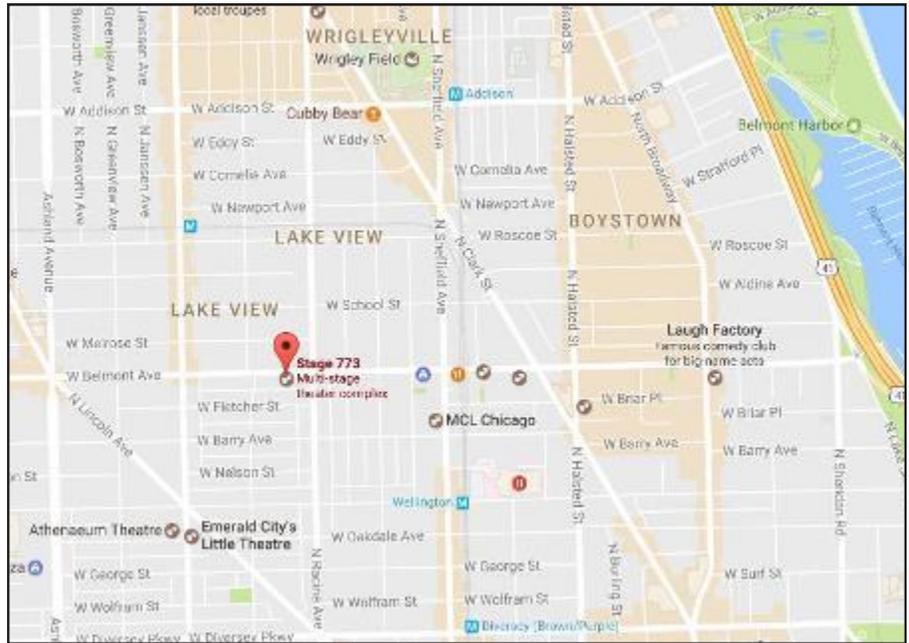
Stage 773  
1225 W Belmont Ave  
Chicago, IL 60657

### **BOX OFFICE**

(773) 654-3103

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

[AmericanBluesTheater.com](http://AmericanBluesTheater.com)



American Blues Theater is supported in part by The Davee Foundation, The MacArthur Funds for Arts & Culture at Prince, the Shubert Foundation, The Chicago Community Trust, SMART Growth Grant, Arts Work Fund, Illinois Arts Council Agency, Anixter Foundation, Actors' Equity Foundation, Northern Trust, Eurex, Benjamin Rosenthal Foundation, Seyfarth Shaw LLP, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and the Chip Pringle Fund. ComEd is the 2018-2019 Season Lighting Sponsor.