



Diane Buzzell, long-time choreographer for Cardinal Stage, leaps to show members of the *Fun Home* cast the movement she wants.

By Molly Brush  
Photography by Rodney Margison

# CARDINAL STAGE ACT III

**A new artistic director, a new  
managing director, new challenges,  
and big plans for the future.**

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## PROLOGUE

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For many Bloomington theatergoers, it's difficult to remember a time when Cardinal Stage Company wasn't around. The largest arts organization in Monroe County, the theater company is woven so deeply into the fabric of the community that it seems like it's always been here.

In reality, Cardinal came into being a mere 13 years ago. Prior to presenting its inaugural production, theater in Bloomington centered around Indiana University Department of Theatre and Drama student productions and Bloomington Playwrights Project presentations of new plays. Despite its vibrant arts and cultural scene, the community lacked a professional theater company that offered both classic and contemporary works.

That changed in 2005, when theater director Randy White moved here from New York City with his wife, Ellen MacKay, who had taken a job teaching English at IU. Seeing an opportunity in the city's limited theater landscape, White founded Cardinal Stage Company, initially using a table at the now-defunct Scholars Inn Bakehouse on the downtown Square as an office while he got the organization up and running.

"It was something nobody had thought of, no one even considered doing or attempting," says longtime Cardinal supporter Cathleen Cameron, whose late husband was one of the organization's first board members. "His vision was so extraordinary."

Caroline Dowd-Higgins, another longtime supporter and president of Cardinal's board of directors, agrees. "It was something that Bloomington had never seen before beyond the university, and it was very special," Dowd-Higgins says. "It was a wonderful new beginning for professional theater in Bloomington."



# ACT I

Cardinal Stage Company made its debut in January 2006 with a highly regarded production of the Thornton Wilder classic *Our Town*. Dowd-Higgins, a former opera singer, recalls seeing the show with her husband, renowned set designer C. David Higgins.

“As a performer, I am a discerning critic about quality of performance,” Dowd-Higgins says. “We went to *Our Town* with an open mind, thinking, ‘Okay, let’s see what this new theater company is,’ and we were blown away.” A lot of people were.

Word quickly spread about the new addition to the city’s theater scene, and the fledgling company took off. Audiences were attracted to the consistent quality of Cardinal productions, says Gabe Gloden, Cardinal’s managing director. “Randy definitely raised the bar in terms of the quality of the acting, scenic design, and all of that stuff, and that got people excited,” Gloden says. “It got that diehard group of folks who were just begging for that kind of experience.”

Under White’s direction, Cardinal flourished. Its first full season, in 2008–09, featured five shows; by the 2010–11 season, the number of productions had grown to eight. Even as the number of productions increased, the company maintained its reputation for excellence as it brought both classic and contemporary works to audiences in south-central Indiana, from mainstays such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* to new works like *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*.

As Cardinal grew, the organization also established several education and outreach initiatives to make theater accessible to the entire community. The Community Ticket Initiative was launched in 2009 to provide free tickets to Cardinal shows for children and families unable to afford them. In summer 2010, the company introduced Cardinal for Kids, its series for young audiences, with a production of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. And in 2013, Cardinal partnered with the IU Credit Union to launch the IU Credit Union Education Initiative, which includes support for Cardinal for Schools—weekday matinee performances for school groups—and master classes for young actors.

“There was definitely a need out there for professional arts programming for children, and Cardinal is the one organization that I think really rose to the occasion and started offering it at a high level,” Gloden says.

Cardinal’s commitment to reaching young audiences inspired Andy Mallor and Geoff Grodner, senior partners at Mallor Grodner Attorneys, to sponsor Cardinal for Kids. “What Cardinal does for kids is amazing,” Mallor says. “Theater makes smarter, braver, happier kids.”

With its reputation for quality productions, its diverse offerings, and its education and outreach initiatives, Cardinal began to build a new audience for theater in Bloomington. “It drew in an audience that wasn’t there before,” Cameron says. “It reached people who didn’t go, for whatever reason.”

By 2016, as Cardinal celebrated its 10th anniversary, it had become difficult to imagine Bloomington without it. But that fall, the organization was confronted with an unexpected development: White announced that at the end of the 2016–17 season, he and his family would move to Chicago, where his wife had accepted a teaching position at the University of Chicago. The curtain was falling on Cardinal’s first act.

Galvin shares a laugh during rehearsal with actor Lanene Charters, who played the beleaguered mother in *Fun Home*.



(left) Cardinal Stage founder Randy White with a poster from the company’s first show, *Our Town*. Photo by Tom Stio (right) Caroline Dowd-Higgins, president of the Cardinal Stage board.

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## ENTR'ACTE

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As White's departure drew near, the Cardinal board and staff faced the formidable task of preparing for a future without the company's founding director. Since starting Cardinal, White had played two roles—that of managing director and artistic director. To begin the transition, Cardinal made those two separate positions.

In 2016, Gloden assumed the role of managing director, bringing with him a wealth of arts administration experience, including seven years as managing director of the Bloomington Playwrights Project.

At the conclusion of the 2016–17 season, White officially left Cardinal, and Gloden and the board began a search for an artistic director. The organization cast a wide net to fill the position, Gloden says, conducting two searches that attracted more than 100 candidates from across the country.

The first search was unsuccessful and ended without a hire. In the midst of the second search, a new name surfaced: Philadelphia-based freelance director Kate Galvin, who was recommended to Gloden by a former colleague at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The timing was fortuitous. Galvin, 38, had just begun searching for a full-time directing position when Gloden contacted her. A native of Philadelphia, Galvin earned a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from New York University and a master's degree in musical theater from Goldsmiths, University of London, with the intention of pursuing an acting career.

"That was what I wanted to do for a really long time," she says. "When I actually started doing it professionally a little bit, I realized that the actor lifestyle does not gel well with my personality."

In 2005, she joined the staff of Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre, one of the largest regional theater companies in the country, where she served as casting director and assistant to the producing artistic director.

While working at Walnut Street, Galvin got her first directing opportunity. "I feel like directing is really the synthesis of my skill sets, both in terms of what it requires in terms of creativity but also organization and collaboration," she says. "As a director, you have to be the leader of the team and the production, but you also have to find ways to work well with others and compromise to bring the show together and make it the best of everyone's contributions, not just your sole vision."

In 2012, she left Walnut Street to strike out on her own as a freelance director. For five years, she directed shows in Philadelphia and across the country, including in Oregon, Texas, and North Carolina, and also served as the associate producer at the 11th Hour Theatre Company in Philadelphia. Several productions under her direction won or were nominated for Barrymore Awards, Philadelphia's equivalent of Broadway's Tony Awards.

Gloden was struck not only by Galvin's résumé, but also by her ability to communicate her artistic vision and her passion for theater. "She can speak about the art form in a way that appeals to older and younger audiences alike," he says.

The rest of the Cardinal staff was equally impressed with Galvin, says Rachel Glago, the organization's marketing director. "There's something about Kate's perspective on where she sees the company and her understanding of what Cardinal is, what it means to the community, but then also the potential of where the organization can go and how it can grow into something that is much



(left) Gabe Gloden, the managing director who came on board in 2016; (right) Rachel Glago, Cardinal Stage marketing director.

bigger than it currently is,” Glago says. “She has this vision for this organization that is very similar to Randy’s but is also willing to expand and to change to the industry and the environment that she is in.”

Glago says that Galvin stood out from other artistic director candidates because

she showed a genuine interest in working collaboratively with the staff. “It wasn’t, ‘I’m going to come in and take over,’” Glago says. “It was, ‘I really want to know what you all want this company to be.’”

Kate Galvin was hired in fall 2017.

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## ACT II

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Galvin officially joined the Cardinal staff last November and immediately went to work. Her second day on the job was the first day of rehearsals for the company’s production of the musical *Peter Pan*.

“I got thrown into the fire right away,” Galvin says. “The good and bad thing is that I’ve been just racing to catch up since I’ve been here, so I haven’t had a lot of free time on my hands to miss home. I’ve also felt such a warm welcome from this community, and that’s made the transition a lot easier.”

With a new artistic director in place, Cardinal began to develop a new strategic plan. At the beginning of 2018, the organization held a series of focus groups for its constituents, including patrons, donors, business and community leaders, other local arts organizations, staff members, and former staff and board members. The goal, Galvin says, was to learn how people perceived Cardinal and what they valued about it, what kinds of works they wanted to see, and how the organization could best serve them.

“What we learned is that the variety of work that Cardinal’s been producing is what people want,” Galvin says. “There are people who love the contemporary plays, there are people who love the holiday show, there are people who want to see classic American drama, there are people who love our kids’ shows. It really is our responsibility in the community to be the big-tent theater company that has something for everyone.”

Another insight from the focus groups is that one of the aspects people value most is the emphasis on theater for young people.

The focus groups also revealed that the desire for Cardinal to eventually own and operate its own brick-and-mortar performance venue—a major goal of Randy White’s—was not as strong as the board and staff thought it was. In fact, the focus-group feedback indicated that Cardinal audiences valued the opportunity to experience theater in different settings. From an artistic

standpoint, Galvin says, this gives Cardinal the flexibility to structure the audience experience in a way that is true to each show.

The feedback from the focus groups was also valuable in planning the 2018–19 season. One opinion the organization heard repeatedly during the focus groups is how much audiences love Cardinal’s annual holiday musical, which has become a tradition for many families.

“It’s really wonderful and charming to be able to give that gift to the community and put on a spectacular show that is a highlight of people’s holiday season,” Galvin says. This year’s production will be the Disney classic *Beauty and the Beast*.

Cardinal provided another opportunity for audiences to give input on the 2018–19 season in the form of a free showcase at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center that featured vignettes from five shows. Feedback from the showcase was instrumental in the decision to present *The Christians*, a contemporary work that Galvin describes as “a smart, compelling play that speaks to people of any faith or of no faith.” *Rounding Third*, a comedy about two Little League coaches with distinctly different personalities, and the Tennessee Williams classic *The Glass Menagerie* round out the main-stage season. Cardinal for Kids will feature *The Lion*, *The Witch and The Wardrobe*, an adaptation of the popular C. S. Lewis novel, and *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley*, based on Jeff Brown’s book *Flat Stanley*.

Galvin’s first months at Cardinal have not been without challenges. The company’s 2017–18 season, which was programmed by White before his departure, originally included a production of *9 to 5: The Musical*, a workplace comedy about women dealing with a lecherous boss. Given the evolving national conversation about sexual misconduct and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, going forward with the show “felt a little tone deaf,” Gloden says. The company



*Fun Home* was Galvin’s directorial debut in Bloomington.





Galvin directing at a *Fun Home* rehearsal.

decided to replace *9 to 5* with *Fun Home*, a musical adaptation of cartoonist Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir of the same name.

Some Cardinal supporters applauded the decision; others were vocal in their opposition to it. Galvin handled the situation with sensitivity, Gloden says. "She very graciously absorbed all of that criticism and had great feedback and responses to all of those folks that was very diplomatic and understanding," he says.

Cardinal's production of *Fun Home*, which was Galvin's mainstage directorial debut, proved to be a success. Galvin says it was gratifying that the risk she took paid off. "The success of the show reinforced that this was a show that really hit a chord with our community," she says.

In future seasons, Galvin wants to continue pushing boundaries in terms of the types of shows Cardinal offers. She plans to start with small projects, such as the staged reading of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, a musical adaptation of the Kurt Vonnegut novel of the same name, that Cardinal performed in May at Granfalloon, an IU Arts and Humanities Council event celebrating Vonnegut.

"I'm looking for opportunities to do small things like that which will nudge our audience in the direction of being excited about taking risks," she says.

As Cardinal's new artistic direction begins to take shape, the company also is introducing a new brand identity. For one, the word "company" has been dropped from the Cardinal name. Cardinal Stage has also introduced a new logo.

The new look was created by board member Armin Vit and his wife, Bryony Gomez-Palacio, owners of



graphic design firm UnderConsideration. There is considerable divide in the Cardinal community about the logo, which is difficult to decipher at first glance—some like it, some don't. Gloden

defends the logo as professional, modern, and clean, with an element of surprise that speaks to the inherent dramatic quality of what Cardinal does.

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As Galvin begins her first full season with Cardinal, she is looking forward to leading the company into its second act. "I really want to put Cardinal on the map as a vibrant



Choreographer Diane Buzzell working with actors Eric J. Olson, who played the troubled father, and Elena Rupp, who played his young daughter.

regional theater company with a strong local talent pool,” she says.

Investing in local talent is a priority. Casting local performers makes shows more affordable because the company doesn't have to pay for travel and accommodations for out-of-town guest artists. And, Gloden notes, “Bloomington loves to see its own people on stage and to see itself reflected on stage. People come out for their local stars.”

One element Bloomington needs in order to strengthen its local talent pool are more opportunities for performers, particularly adults, to build their skills, Galvin says. She plans to address that need by offering training and mentorship opportunities for both adult and young performers, such as the four-session workshop she led earlier this year on auditioning for musical theater productions.

As the company finds new ways to nurture local talent, it also will continue to bring in guest performers for its productions. “I think that giving our local artists an opportunity to work side by side with really talented people from elsewhere is something that will enrich their experience of our organization and add value to our productions,” Galvin says. It also will help build Cardinal's national reputation, she adds. “When we work with artists from Chicago and they go back and tell their designer friends or actor friends that they've had a good experience with us, that makes other people want to come work for us.”

Unlike White, who directed almost all Cardinal productions, Galvin will direct some, but the company will bring in guest directors for others. “Kate brings with her a wealth of contacts and relationships with the greater theater community that I think she's going to be able to tap into to build our national reputation,” Gloden says.

Working collaboratively with other local arts organizations is another priority for Cardinal Stage. During the focus group the company hosted for area arts groups, the company learned that other arts organizations want Cardinal to be a champion for collaboration in the sector.

“As we craft the strategic plan, Cardinal now has a new vision to be part of an arts ecosystem, not just a stand-alone company, and I think that's a pivotal difference right now,” Dowd-Higgins says. “We are bridging and fostering relationships with the university, with Bloomington Playwrights Project, with Jewish Theatre of Bloomington, with musical entities in Bloomington. Bloomington has incredible arts organizations, and we're all in this together. It's been lovely to see Kate and Gabe really embrace that.”

Galvin hopes to have at least one co-production with another local theater company during Cardinal's 2019–20 season. The organization also is exploring opportunities for local arts organizations to operate more efficiently by sharing resources. Currently, Cardinal Stage is in the process of partnering with Bloomington Playwrights Project to hire a joint technical director, a position both organizations historically have struggled to fill.

“I definitely want Cardinal to be a good collaborator and partner in the community at large and also within the artistic community so that we can all do work on a new level,” Galvin says.

Cardinal Stage also plans to work more collaboratively with its business sponsors, Dowd-Higgins says. The organization wants to ensure that its relationships with sponsors are mutually beneficial, not just financial transactions.

“We are in partnership with our community businesses,” she says. “It's not just getting a sponsorship; it's, ‘How can we help you achieve your mission as a business? How can we make this work for you as well?’ It's not just a program ad; it's, ‘How can we partner with you to achieve your goals?’”





(above) The behind-the-scenes supporting crew for *Fun Home*: (front row, l-r) Nicole Bruce, Philip Christiansen, Becky Underwood, Chelsea Pell, Sam Ireland, Artistic Director Kate Galvin, Britton Mauk, Erin Gautille, Diane Buzzell, and Audie Deinlein; (back row, l-r) Charlotte Rivard-Hoster, Macy Kloville, Robert Hornbostel, Joel Magill, Mike Inwood, and Christopher Simanton.



Galvin gives direction to three young stars in the show: Isaac Lochbihler, Elena Rupp, and Rhys Nelsen.

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Cardinal's remarkable success over the past decade doesn't mean that it's immune to the current challenges facing nonprofit arts organizations.

"How do you program a season that appeals to a wide audience but also appeals to those tried-and-true fans?" Glago asks. "That's something the theater industry across the country is facing."

And although Bloomington has outstanding artistic and cultural resources for a city of its size, the arts funding ecosystem is lacking, particularly when it comes to public support for the arts, says Gloden. "We have a lot of organizations—Cardinal included—just struggling to accumulate the necessary resources in order to be independent and solvent financially and serve the population that we need to serve without charging up the wazoo for tickets," he says.

Cardinal's rapid growth has presented another challenge for the company. It has outgrown its administrative office at 900 S. Walnut St., but an even more pressing need is for the company to have its own rehearsal, storage, and shop space—right now it has to "beg, borrow, and steal" space on a show-by-show basis, Gloden says.

The organization has put the Walnut Street building up for sale with the hope of realizing a significant gain that will allow it to invest in facilities that meet its needs. Galvin says the company would like to have an administrative office with an easily accessible box office downtown and a separate facility elsewhere for rehearsal, storage, and shop space.

"It will make a huge difference to our company in terms of what we're able to achieve," she says.

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## EPILOGUE

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It's been a year since Randy White left Bloomington. Much has changed at Cardinal in that time, and there are more changes to come. But many aspects remain the same, foremost among them Cardinal's commitment to offering professional theater of the highest caliber.

"We absolutely must and will continue to maintain that level of excellence," Dowd-Higgins says. Likewise, the company will continue to offer a variety of classic and contemporary works, and its education and outreach initiatives remain a top priority.

But if Cardinal is to establish a reputation as one of the country's top regional theater companies, it must do more than maintain the status quo. It must find "that next evolution that's going to get that next wave of people invested in the company," Gloden says—and that means taking risks.

Galvin adds, "The more good work we can get in front of people that they don't recognize but then enjoy, the more we can get people used to taking risks and trusting us that if we're producing it, it's going to be worthwhile."

Despite the challenges ahead, Cardinal supporters are confident that the company is well-positioned to build on Randy White's legacy as it continues to advance professional theater in Bloomington.

"It's a very sincere belief of mine that Bloomington is a better place because of Cardinal Stage," Dowd-Higgins says. "The power of live theater is transformative, and Cardinal is passionate about making that happen in our community." ✨