

NEWS RELEASE

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***Prancer* brings a message of hope for the holidays in its stage debut at The Rose Theater**

(OMAHA, Nebr.) When an injured reindeer appears in a young girl's backyard, it sets the stage for a story filled with heart and hope in the new stage adaptation of the film *Prancer*, making its world debut on The Rose stage. The show, which opens Friday, Nov. 25 and runs through Dec. 18, 2016, will showcase breathtaking puppetry and a heartwarming story to bring light to the holiday season.

Director Matthew Gutschick explains that *Prancer* is not your typical Christmas story. There are no dancing elves or snowmen that talk. Instead, the plot revolves around a very realistic child living in a town just like many you find in the Heartland. *Prancer* tells the story of young Jessica Riggs, played by Chloe Irwin (*A Wrinkle in Time*, *Honk, Ramona Quimby*), whose family has fallen on hard times. Her father, John -- played by Nils Haaland (*Jackie & Me*) -- is a tough, no-nonsense farmer struggling to make ends meet. Jessica's mother has recently passed away, and Jessica tries to make sense of her profound loss.

All around Jessica, townspeople bustle about their business, preparing for the holidays, and in many cases, giving no thought to the meaning of the season. Jessica feels alone in her belief in Santa, and alone in a big world that often doesn't make sense to her.

"*Prancer* definitely has a different tone for a holiday show," says director Matthew Gutschick. "It addresses problems that real families today might be dealing with also showing us a truly fantastic event that changes the community in a meaningful way."

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Prancer brings a message of hope at

The Rose Theater

Page 2 of 5

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Amid the Christmas chaos, an injured reindeer appears in the forest behind Jessica's family farm. She believes him to be Santa's reindeer Prancer and decides to do whatever is necessary to nurse him back to health. In her quest to heal Prancer, Jessica enlists the help of a wide variety of personalities from the town of Three Oaks, sharing her infectious joy, and changing lives with her holiday spirit.

Costumes by designer Sherri Geerdes reflect Jessica's hopefulness in contrast to the rest of the town. Geerdes explains that she wanted to have the characters portray a timeless quality that could have them living in any time period. While Jessica's costumes are bright and cheerful, the rest of the cast is dressed in more subdued tones, almost as if a sort of cloud follows them about their business. This juxtaposition helps Jessica stand out from the other children in the cast and also re-emphasizes her feelings of not quite fitting in.

Creating a life-sized reindeer on stage was one of the most daunting challenges faced by **Prancer**'s creators. Puppet designer Eric Novak was charged with bringing Prancer to life. A resident of New York City, Novak has designed and built puppets and specialty props for a wide range of clients, including Radio City Music Hall and the Omaha Symphony.

The resulting design is a larger-than-life reindeer that is operated by three puppeteers in full view of the audience. With nods to *War Horse*, the puppet is a beautifully-abstract creature built from rattan that is both skeletal and full-bodied at the same time. Large gleaming eyes give life to the reindeer, which is further animated with moving ears and tail. Great care has been given by the puppeteers and puppet choreographer Stephanie Jacobson to replicate lifelike movements that help the puppet become a fully-realized character on stage.

To complement the reindeer puppet's lines, scenic designer Adam Rowe has created a minimalistic set that merely hints at locations. It consists of many layers, giving it an illusion of depth. Through it all, however, you can always see the forest where Jessica first encounters Prancer.

"This constant backdrop of the forest helps ground the community in a rural setting -- a type of community that many of Rose audience members will likely be familiar with," says Gutschick.

In keeping with the storyline's austerity, the set will be almost monochromatic in the beginning, with color being added as Jessica's holiday spirit grows through the town. A particularly fun aspect of the set will be when Mrs. McFarland's decorations are revealed, extending into the Rose auditorium. "It should feel like the theater just comes alive," says Gutschick.

= MORE =

Prancer brings a message of hope at

The Rose Theater

Page 3 of 5

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By the time **Prancer** ends in its dramatic climax, audience members will be treated to vibrant colors, festive lights, a flying reindeer, and, of course -- snow!

The play, **Prancer**, which was first produced as a motion picture by Raffaella De Laurentiis, was adapted for the stage by the original screenwriter, Greg Taylor. The Rose is the first theater to present the stage adaptation.

Producing the show was one of Gutschick's top goals when he first came to The Rose five years ago, but obtaining the rights to the script proved challenging, as the title had changed hands and had been passed along from studio to studio. In the end, The Rose was able to contact the original screenwriter, Greg Taylor, who was intrigued by the idea of revisiting the script.

"Greg wrote the original screenplay for his daughter because he wanted a film that she could watch as she grew up," explains Gutschick. "Today, his daughter is grown and has a three-year-old son, so the idea of revitalizing the story for a new generation definitely appealed to him."

Gutschick notes that the play has piqued interest throughout the theater world with multiple publishers and other theater inquiring about the script once it has made its premiere.

Prancer is recommended for families of children ages seven and up. The show runs Nov. 25 through Dec. 18, 2016, with performances on Fridays at 7 pm, and Saturdays at 2 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. The show is approximately two hours long with an intermission. On Saturday, Dec. 3, the performance will be interpreted for audience members who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Saturday, Dec. 17 performance will feature audio description for audience members who are blind, but arrangements must be made at least two weeks prior to the show date. Call (402) 502-4637 for information on audio description services.

Tickets for **Prancer** are \$27 Main Floor and \$22 Balcony. Discount ticket vouchers are available at all area Hy-Vee stores through a purchase of a Kid Cuisine product. Members of The Rose receive discounted tickets to the production.

Prancer is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Kid Cuisine, Hy-Vee, Nebraska Life Magazine, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Special opening night activities, including live reindeer at the theater on Nov. 25, are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

For additional information, or to purchase tickets, visit www.rosetheater.org or call The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849.

= MORE =

Prancer brings a message of hope at

The Rose Theater

Page 4 of 5

Contact: Kori Radloff, 402-502-4641

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.

About Matthew Gutschick, Director

Prancer is being directed by Rose Artistic Director Matthew Gutschick. His recent directing credits at The Rose include *The Little Mermaid*, *Peter & The Starcatcher*, *A Christmas Story*, *Mary Poppins*, *Robin Hood* and *Ramona Quimby*. Other directing credits include *Cyrano* with Parallel 45, *The Sparrow*, *Twelfth Night* and *Anon(ymous)* at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, *Wuthering Heights* at the Mint Theatre in New York, and *Whacked Fairy Tales* at Twin City Stage. His plays have been workshopped/produced by Wordsmyth Theatre Company, Horse Trade Theater Group (NYC), Reverie Productions (NYC), Tri State Actors' Theatre, and Magic Chicago. His work for MagicMouth Theatre won a New Horizons Playwriting Award and the company premiered a new magic-theatre piece, *A Christmas Carol In Prose* with Parallel 45 in Traverse City, MI. He is the former artistic director of the Children's Theatre of Winston-Salem and completed a fellowship with the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis under the mentorship of Peter Brosius. Gutschick assisted Peter Brosius on productions of *500 Hats of Bartholemew Cubbins* and *A Christmas Story*. He is a former Managing Director of the Yale Cabaret where he produced over 14 world premieres. He is also the recipient of a Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation Fellowship in Entrepreneurship, a member of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, and a graduate of the School at Steppenwolf. He holds a BA in Theater from Wake Forest University and received an MFA in Theater Management from the Yale School of Drama. Gutschick is in his fifth season as artistic director of The Rose.

= MORE =

Prancer brings a message of hope at

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Page 5 of 5

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About Eric Novak, Puppet Designer

Eric Novak is a puppet designer, sculptor, fabricator and master craftsman working in film, theatre, museum exhibition and store display. In his Brooklyn studio, Novak has designed and built puppets and specialty props for a wide range of clients including Radio City Music Hall, Omaha Symphony, Brookfield Properties, Scholastic, The Skirball Cultural Center, and Mabou Mines among many others.

Most recently Novak designed and directed puppets for Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular which premiered in March 2015. Previously, Novak made his Broadway debut puppeteering as Magic Screen in "The Pee Wee Herman Show" (2010). In 2007, the permanent exhibit Noah's Ark opened at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. Novak sculpted 25 pairs of life-size animal heads in wood, along with the sculptural welding of puppets and kinetic sculptures designed by Christopher Green. Also, he was the Lead Sculptor at Constructive Display, Inc., for clients such as Disney, Sony and Scholastic Books. He also constructed four life-sized marionettes for the feature film "The American Astronaut" (2001), two parade-scale puppets for the North American Tour of "Miss Saigon" (2002), and a 25-foot praying mantis puppet for the Village Halloween Parade (2001).

Currently in production is his first short film with puppets, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" in which he is designer and director. Original theatrical works include "The Adventures of Charcoal Boy" at the HERE Arts Center (2006) and the National Puppet Festival (St. Paul, MN, 2007), "The Bacon / Mingus Triptych" at the Voice 4 Vision Puppet Festival (2004), "E-Volution" at the Jim Henson Puppet Festival Cabaret (2000), and "Rex Rocket inOuter Space" at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, GA (1997).

In addition, Novak has designed and built puppets for many other notable artists and companies including: Basil Twist/Tandem Otter Productions – including the Broadway production of "The Addams Family", Jon Ludwig, Ping Chong, Roudabout Theater Company, Amy Trumpeter, Tom Lee, Matt Acheson, and Chris Green.

Novak has received numerous grants from the Jim Henson Foundation and is a MacDowell Colony Fellow. He received his BFA in Set Design from Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (1989). He lives with his wife and two children in Brooklyn, New York.

About Greg Taylor, Playwright

Greg Taylor was born in Pittsburgh, PA and grew up in Pleasant Hills, a suburb south of the city. After graduating from Penn State, where he met his wife, Joanne, Taylor was a professional musician for about five years, before moving to Los Angeles to try my luck as a screenwriter. He is perhaps best known for his screenplay "Jumanji," but he considers "Prancer" his favorite of his films. Taylor has two children, Jessica and Ian. He loves being a family man and after having children, Taylor started to write family films and books for middle grade and young adult readers. His books include the "Killer Pizza" series and "The Girl Who Became a Beatle."