

# Arts



Mark Cuddy as Georges with the Cagelles in Geva Theatre Center's production of "La Cage aux Folles." PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOAT FACTORY MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

## 'I love that it's a love story'

Can a little drag, and dancing by the director, add to Geva's momentum?

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In a way, Geva Theatre Center's staging of "La Cage aux Folles," which opened Sept. 7, has been more than 40 years in the making.

It was in the 1970s when Geva's artistic director, Mark Cuddy, first saw the French film version of the show, and the story has resonated with him ever since.

"I love that it's a love story," he said. "I love that there's so much love in it in terms of family — and the family not only raising the son but the extended

club family — the Cagelles, the dancers, the community they've created is extraordinary. It tears me up every time I think about it or watch the film. It's just very heartwarming to me. And it's really funny."

The family he's referring to includes Georges, who's gay, and his partner Albin and Georges' son, Jean Michel. Georges owns a nightclub in St. Tropez that features the Cagelles, a chorus line of flamboyant drag performers and the core of the club's entertainment.

The fuse on the plot is lit when

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Mark Cuddy as Georges and Danny Vaccaro as Albin in Geva's "La Cage aux Folles."

# Love

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Georges' son announces he's planning to marry the daughter of one of France's most conservative politicians. And so begins a hilarious effort to somehow portray themselves as a "normal" family while hosting a meet-the-parents dinner. Geva is doing the musical version of "La Cage," which debuted on Broadway in 1983 and won six Tony Awards including Best Musical and Best Score. And of course, "La Cage" was made even more famous in 1996 with the hit film "The Birdcage," an American version of the story set in Miami's South Beach and starring Gene Hackman, Robin Williams and Nathan Lane.

## Why he's singing and dancing

Besides being one of Cuddy's favorite titles, "La Cage" will be a special production for Cuddy for other reasons. It will kick off his 25th season since taking his post at Geva in 1995. And he's playing Georges, which means he's singing and dancing on stage for the first time — it's his first musical as an actor.

It's not the kind of leap most people take when turning 65 (his birthday was in August), but Cuddy said he had wanted to tackle singing and dancing on stage. Beyond that, he has a kinship with Georges, a role Cuddy has always wanted to play.

"Georges is in a long-term relationship, which I am, has a 24-year-old son, which I do, and runs an entertainment venue, which I do," he said with a laugh. "I'm relating to him in that way. I feel very close to him in many ways."

Performing "La Cage" has been discussed at Geva in the past, Cuddy said. But it's a big undertaking, and the show never materialized. Until now. His 25th anniversary — combined with the fact that in recent years Geva has been launching its subscriber seasons with a musical — apparently tipped the scales.

"It was a special circumstance. We said 'OK, well, let's try to raise some extra money ... to celebrate my 25th and to underwrite the show a little bit and do something fun,'" Cuddy said.

## From 'sketchy' to expansion

For Cuddy and Geva, delivering a show as complex and colorful as "La Cage" could represent yet another raising of the bar in Geva's ongoing renaissance.

When Cuddy arrived at Geva in 1995, he could see the potential in the theater's support and the people of Rochester, but not much else. Geva was "a tough place" with at times dwindling audiences. Downtown was a "little sketchy." There was no education department, beyond one person doing student matinees. And there was conflict among some staff members, resulting in departures.

"In a pretty obvious way to me — because I had been running theaters all my life, and I was 41 when I arrived — I could tell that there was a lot of potential ... a lot of opportunity," Cuddy said. "You want to go into a situation where you know you can make a difference, and it looked like I could really make a difference here. I just saw there was no energy, no artistic vision. Yet there were really nice people, and they still had a strong subscriber base."

Since then, the education department has expanded, a second theater space was added and the nonprofit undertook a \$9-million renovation. Perhaps most importantly, the quality of work has gotten better.

The results are being felt at the box office. Geva's revenues have grown 150% since 1995. All this happened despite two serious recessions (in 2000 and 2008) that wiped out a number of regional theaters around the country.

For the past few years the theater has been "working on all cylinders," Cuddy said.



Danny Vaccaro in Geva's "La Cage aux Folles."  
COAT FACTORY MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

## So what's next?

"We have to look outside our building," Cuddy said. "We have to have a bigger impact in various communities in Rochester that we're currently not serving ... some education work, some facilitating of community events. How can we have a deeper impact in our community? So we're looking outside our walls now. We just hired a director of engagement. We're looking to expand our educational offerings and our engagement opportunities with communities we're currently not serving. That's the vision. We got this humming and then we can have a larger impact."

And assuming Geva can stick the landing, "La Cage" — because of its complexity — should only add to the momentum.

"It's a big undertaking — it's one of the largest we've done in terms of costumes and wigs — 50 wigs," he said. "Lord knows how many costumes." The biggest challenge, he said, is "the scale of the spectacle."

"When people see it, they'll go, 'Wow,'" Cuddy said. "That's been challenging on our production team. They are fantastic artisans and technicians and crafts people and artists, but it's big. That's the challenge."

Plus, expect some exceptional dancing — and not just by the artistic director.

"The dancing by the six core dancers who play the Gagelles — the female impersonators who do all these big number — is extraordinary," he said. "They have a huge range of work they're doing — all sorts of different dances — as the club performers. And they're doing it in heels. And they're doing it in wigs and flamboyant costumes. The six guys are just amazing."

"La Cage aux Folles" runs through Oct. 6.

Jason Cottrell is a Rochester-area freelancer.