

ON THE TOWN

'Hungry Like the Wolf'

Under new director Leffler, History Theatre looks back at Willmar Eight

BY ANNE MURPHY

Taking on the role of artistic director at History Theatre could not have come at a better time for Laura Leffler. The theater is approaching its 50th season in 2027, and Leffler views the milestone as an invitation to expand its legacy. Then there is the History Theatre's upcoming production of *Hungry Like the Wolf*, which Leffler is directing.

Leffler's appointment was announced in February as rehearsals for *Hungry Like the Wolf* were getting underway. The play by Twin Cities actress Sandra Struthers addresses equal rights in the workplace. It opens a four-week run on March 19 on the stage at 30 E. 10th St.

Leffler had been History Theatre's interim artistic director since last summer when her predecessor, Richard D. Thompson, stepped down. She first went to work for History Theatre in 2022, producing and directing new and evolving plays in its annual Raw Stages Festival. That is where *Hungry Like the Wolf* was first read in the fall of 2024.

After moving to the Twin Cities in 2006, Leffler founded the theater Umbrella Collective (formerly Savage Umbrella). She has also worked with Guthrie Theater, Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Children's Theatre Company, the Playwrights' Center and Park Square Theatre.

"I spent a lot of time learning, working with a lot of people at a lot of different levels, and it feels so good to be entrusted to lead this organization in a community I already love so much," she said. "When I first read *Hungry Like the Wolf*, I was really

drawn to it because of the way (Struthers) talks with a lot of authenticity about things that too often don't get talked about."

The title is taken from a song by the 1980s rock group Duran Duran. The at times irreverent comedy is centered around the 1977-79 strike by eight women who worked at Citizens National Bank in Willmar. The story is told from Struthers' perspective as one who grew to appreciate the importance of the strike. While telling the Willmar Eight's story, she also

references a not-so-successful film about the women and a star's fight with McCarthyism.

"The form of the play is really postmodern, flashing between subjects pretty quickly," Leffler said. "There are a lot of different layers to the storytelling right from the beginning."

Struthers plays herself in the production. "Having the playwright in the cast is unusual,"

Leffler said. "On the one hand, it's wonderful because the playwright is always there and you can ask questions. On the other hand, we want to allow Sandra the space and time she needs to be a performer."

It was the bravery of the Willmar Eight that inspired Struthers to write the play. "Then, when I found out there was a silly made-for-TV movie about the event and when I discovered that the maker of this movie was a Broadway star turned movie star turned director, I knew I had to write a show that included all of these elements," she said. "I wanted to create a show where there is a conversation about how historical events impact our present lives. So I contextualize the strike in the

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Director Laura Leffler and playwright and actress Sandra Struthers take a break between rehearsals for the History Theatre's production of *Hungry Like the Wolf*, opening on March 19. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

trajectory of my own life in Minnesota."

Hamline-Midway actress Jen Maren plays a myriad of characters in the play, including Glennis Ter Wisscha, one of the Willmar Eight. "I have the glorious challenge of playing a character as ridiculous and flighty as a character can be, and then in the end doing a 180 to become a character of thoughtful sage advice who delivers one of the play's main themes of hope," she said.

"For 10 years, I've been playing Marjorie Congdon in History Theatre's *Glensheen*," Maren said. "Sandra has been alongside me playing Marjorie's sister Jennifer in that show. It has been a treat to be on stage with her and to watch her work on this script for almost the entirety of those 10 years. She has honed and finessed this script. It's funny, fast-paced, vulnerable, heartbreaking and kaleidoscopic."

"The play discusses really hard topics through the lens of comedy," Maren added, "which is a brilliant way to get audiences to listen more openly to tough topics such as gender inequity, the gender pay gap, sexual assault, workplace misogyny and the experience of being female in our society."

East Side actress Jen Burleigh-Bentz also plays several roles in *Hungry*. "I'm lucky enough to be able to portray a few really iconic people, and that's an amazingly fun challenge," she said. "How often is one able to play a movie star turned director, a politician and the playwright's mother in one show?"

"The Willmar Eight were striking for equal treatment, equal pay, and we're still working towards that today," Burleigh-Bentz said. "We're seeing a resurgence of inequalities across the board — race, gender, class — so looking back to learn from history is a solid way to understand that we haven't won yet."

"I genuinely hope *Hungry Like the Wolf* is thought-provoking," Struthers said. "I don't want the show to provide answers as much as invite the audience to ask questions about how to exist in community cooperatively, how to show up for one another and how to understand our place in the world."

Hungry Like the Wolf will be performed Thursdays through Sundays through April 12. For show times and tickets, visit historytheatre.com.