



NEWS RELEASE

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STAGES ST. LOUIS HOLDS SENSORY-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE OF DISNEY'S THE ARISTOCATS

(ST. LOUIS) – STAGES St. Louis will present, for the first time, a Sensory-Friendly Performance of its Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) production of Disney's *The Aristocats* on Tuesday, June 23rd at 10:00 AM at the Playhouse at Westport Plaza in Maryland Heights. Modeled on the nationally-renowned Theatre Development Fund (TDF) Accessibility Program's Autism Theatre Initiative, the special performance will provide those on the autism spectrum or other sensitivity conditions an accessible, friendly experience in which to experience live musical theatre.

Since the beginning of the year, STAGES' staff members have been busy making arrangements for this special performance of Disney's *The Aristocats*. To guarantee day-of success, STAGES entered into a partnership with TDF and had multiple opportunities to seek guidance and counsel from Philip Dallmann, Manager of Accessibility Programs of TDF. Philip will be traveling from New York to see the Sensory-Friendly Performance on June 23rd. STAGES also sought advice from Jonathan Shmidt Chapman, Associate Director of Programming & Production for Lincoln Center Education at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Locally, Executive Director of VSA Missouri – The State Organization on Arts and Disability, Gina Alvarez, conducted a walk-through of the Westport Playhouse and suggested specifics on the performance's set up. Paula Burner, a teacher at one of STAGES' partnering schools in the Special School District, held a one-hour training session in preparation for the performance for all attending staff, cast, crew, house managers, ushers, and teaching artists.

Based on their recommendations, the theatre environment and performance will be altered with the goal of providing a safe, sensory-friendly, comfortable, and judgement-free space that is welcoming for all audience members. These adjustments will include house lights remaining partially on throughout the show, comfortable volume levels and the elimination of jarring sound effects, audience members free to talk and leave their seats under the supervision of a parent or caregiver, snacks and drinks allowed inside the theatre, the permission of headphones if needed, and the availability of on-site support team. In addition, a separately-staffed "Quiet Zone," located directly outside the theatre, will offer seating, coloring activities, and fidgets if a student needs to leave the performance. Special resources such as a "Social Story," walking audience members through the day-of performance experience, as well as a "Character Guide," comparing the characters from the film version of *The Aristocats* to their stage counterparts, have been provided to all attendees in advance of the production.

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Thanks to the generous support of the event's Production Sponsors, the completely-underwritten performance will draw its audience from Howard Park Center, Litzinger School District, and Promise Academy – all pre-existing relationships built through STAGES' Access the Arts programs. Since 2005, STAGES' Access the Arts programming has provided classes, workshops, and performance opportunities enabling children with physical, cognitive, and developmental challenges, including Down syndrome, visual impairments, and autism, to participate fully in the musical theatre arts. Taught by professionally-trained teaching artists and special educators, Access the Arts includes year-round once-a-week classes, multi-week summer workshops, as well as the performing ensemble *Troupe Broadway*. Access the Arts is the only program of its kind in the St. Louis region and currently serves more than 350 students annually.

STAGES St. Louis is the region's foremost not-for-profit company committed to preserving and advancing the art form of Musical Theatre through excellence in performance and education. In 2015, STAGES celebrates its 29th year of producing Broadway-quality theatre, presenting 144 performances from May through October to nearly 50,000 patrons, during its mainstage season.

STAGES would like to thank Corporate Sponsor Emerson, Educational Sponsor Lindell Bank, Production Sponsor Susan M. Hale, and Outreach Sponsors Sakiyama Family Foundation and Elizabeth Green. Special thanks to Elizabeth Green and Nestlé Purina for their support of the Sensory-Friendly Performance as well as the Theatre Development Fund's Autism Theatre Initiative for serving as an advisor. www.tdf.org/autism

STAGES ST. LOUIS is grateful for the support of the Regional Arts Commission, and has been funded in part by the Arts & Education Council. In addition, financial assistance has been provided by the Missouri Arts Council.

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