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CONTACT: Kori Radloff, korir@rosetheater.org, 402-502-4641

World premiere production of *Van Gogh & Me* brings art alive on The Rose stage

(OMAHA, Nebr.) Like an artist's brushstrokes on a canvas, Rose artistic director Matthew Gutschick has carefully composed a powerfully poignant work of art in the upcoming Rose world premiere production, ***Van Gogh & Me***, which opens Friday, November 3 and runs through November 12 on The Rose mainstage.

Gutschick's original play, ***Van Gogh & Me***, is based on actual events. ***Van Gogh & Me*** finds the famous artist Vincent Van Gogh (played by Ezra Colón) in the small town of Auberge-Sur-Oise during the three months preceding his death in 1890. His colorful and challenging career has left him weary and struggling to find his way as an artist. His unusual painting style and lack of formal education is misunderstood, and even ridiculed, by his peers. His greatest wish is simply to be left alone with his paint.

At the same time, a young girl named Adeline (played by Anna Jordan) and her parents (Stephanie Jacobson and Nils Haaland) have also moved to the town where they run a small inn and café. Unhappy and lonely, Adeline struggles to make friends and has a hard time fitting in with a pair of rambunctious children, Rene (Robby Stone) and Cecile (Mallory Freilich), when they show an interest in her (and her family's tasty café rolls). The two neighbors tell Adeline of the mysterious artist Van Gogh, whom they have heard is "crazy" and will be staying at her inn. Adeline is not excited about this prospect because such a guest—as Rene warns her—might scare away other customers, like the somewhat arrogant Martinez, an artist already staying at the inn.

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The Rose Theater
2001 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68102

t (402) 345-4849
f (402) 344-7255
www.rosetheater.org



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When Adeline finally meets Vincent while she is preparing his room, she finds him gruff and not very pleasant. But as she gets to know him better—and witnesses how others treat him—she starts to develop a friendship with him. After getting roped into a couple of unkind pranks Rene and Cecile orchestrate to harass Van Gogh, she feels very badly. She eventually agrees to pose while Van Gogh paints her portrait and he teaches her more about why he creates his art the way he does.

Van Gogh & Me has been a labor of love for both playwright Matthew Gutschick and director John Hardy. Both have spent years studying the artist and draw inspiration from his creative life for their own work.

“One of the things that happened to Van Gogh after he died, he started to be defined more by his mental illness than anything else. I wanted to write something that looked beyond that,” says Gutschick.

Gutschick was particularly taken by a short memoir of Van Gogh. She recalled her experience living with Van Gogh during the last three months of his life while he lived at her family’s house. This individual was Adeline Ravoux, the play’s central character.

“Viewed through the eyes of a person who was, at the time, a child, this wasn’t the derogatory depiction that society had painted of Van Gogh. It was someone who was kind, who was compassionate, a beautiful human being. When viewed through the eyes of a child, the world’s perspective on Van Gogh shifted gently. It felt like an important children’s play that I wanted to write.”

Echoing Gutschick’s passion for the artist and the play based on his life is guest director John Hardy. “A play like *Van Gogh & Me* that has grown from within this company, from within The Rose, written by Matt, is really a pleasure. Its subject matter is filled with passion and a great deal of caring. I am thankful that I get to be the steward of this piece,” says Hardy.

Hardy returns to The Rose stage after directing last season’s *Jungle Book* and the 2013 production of *Jackie & Me*. Hardy is an Associate Artist with The Barter Theatre, with an M.F.A. from the University of Alabama and a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University. He has been working around the country as a playwright, actor and director for over thirty years. He has directed over one hundred professional productions at theaters throughout the United States. As a playwright he has had over forty productions of fifteen plays produced across the country and overseas.

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Hardy acknowledges that **Van Gogh & Me** is a beautiful, but very complex, play to put onstage. He set out to recreate a feeling of stepping into one of Van Gogh's paintings, a challenge scenic designer Jeff Stander addressed by creating large surfaces filled with three-dimensional textures to symbolically represent the brushstrokes in Van Gogh's paintings. Projection designer Brittany Merenda's expansive use of images not only fill The Rose stage with vivid images of the painter's most famous works, but also set them into motion, trying to replicate the feeling the original works of art evoke.

"The only thing I can say about these paintings is the sense of motion inside these paintings. They hum. They buzz," say Gutschick.

Merenda's projection design work has been featured at The Rose in *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*. Her work has won multiple awards, including the Barbizon Award at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. Her unique artistry blends large scale projection mapping on non-traditional surfaces to bring an innovative atmosphere to theatrical productions like **Van Gogh & Me**.

The **Van Gogh & Me** set also features multiple platforms, ramps and slopes to give a sense of nature. Large mesh clouds hang overhead; together with Merenda's projections, lighting and sound designer Craig Moxon is able to change the clouds' appearance from light and airy to full of color, to reflect the mood onstage. He has approached the overall lighting design like a painter spreading color on a canvas.

"I remember thinking when I was younger, wouldn't it be great if someone invented a sort of 3D glasses, but they would be Van Gogh glasses, so when you put them on, the world became these wonderful brushstrokes and the world became a little more vibrant? That's what I wanted to bring to **Van Gogh & Me**," he says.

Lighting choices throughout the production will move the audience from a simple French province to a fantastic world filled with color and light that transform in conjunction with the emotions playing out on stage, a transformation that echoes Van Gogh's paintings. "It is my hope that the audience can start to experience, not only the emotional content of this story, but maybe also Van Gogh's palette, and start to see this through his eyes," Moxon explains. "I want the audience to feel that emotion and understand Van Gogh's vision."

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Moxon has also focused on creating the right soundtrack for the show, bringing in musician and composer Adam Sherrerd (who many may remember from his work on *Babe the Sheep Pig* earlier this season) to add ambiance and emotional depth to the show. “Adam has been able to create this perfect soundtrack and has added his vibrancy to this piece that we are working on. I think audiences will really appreciate what he brings to the show,” he says.

Props master Devon Denn-Young has spent hours researching the facts about the time period and location, so that she can present as authentic a representation of the Ravoux house and café as possible. Working from photos of the original inn and café at the time that Van Gogh lived there, she has given careful attention to everything from the furnishings to the food. Even the lace curtains hanging in the café windows have been pieced together by hand and hand-dyed to get an authentic look.

Costume designer Erin Bragg was influenced by the many self-portraits Van Gogh painted, leading her to the artist’s signature blue coat and straw hat. Bragg has attempted to match the description Adeline gives in her memoir: “a blue drill jacket, shorter than an ordinary jacket, which he wore constantly. He did not wear either collar or tie. For headgear, he wore a felt hat with large flaps, and when the sun shone a straw hat like those worn by gardeners or fishermen. Overall his appearance was neglected.” Adeline’s dress is richly textured and gives the illusion of layers of thick oil paint, as Van Gogh illustrated in his painting of her, *Portrait of Adeline Ravoux*, which the actual Adeline Ravoux is reported as describing a “symphony in blue.” Other costumes also include the feeling of rustic charm combined with artistic beauty.

All the Rose artists bringing ***Van Gogh & Me*** to the stage share a passion for the piece that they hope to communicate to audiences during the show’s world premiere run.

“When I first got the script, I was really struck by it,” says Moxon. “there is a real simple kind of nature to it, but underneath that dialogue that seems really simple, there is so much depth. But I don’t think of it as depth; I really think of it as vibrancy. It really spoke to me in that way. When I finished reading the script, it just really struck me emotionally. This piece means a lot to me, and it means a lot to everyone who is working on it.”

Gutschick says that as he crafted ***Van Gogh & Me***, he wanted to provide dimension, depth and encouragement to the children and adults who experience the piece, and to tilt them to the most compassionate view of their fellow human beings.

“Because none of us what to be defined by the things that are wrong with us,” he says.

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Van Gogh & Me runs November 3-12, 2017, with performances on Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm and 5 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. A bonus performance is offered on Sunday, November 12 at 5 pm. The 2 pm show of **Van Gogh & Me** on Saturday, November 11 will be interpreted for people who are deaf or hard of hearing; this show will also include audio description services for audience members who are blind. The 5 pm show on Saturday, November 11 is designated as sensory-friendly, with special accommodations made for families attending with a child on the autism spectrum. Contact The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 for more information.

Tickets for **Van Gogh & Me** are \$20. Discount ticket vouchers are available for \$16 at area Hy-Vee stores. Members of The Rose receive four free tickets to the production.

Van Gogh & Me is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Security National Bank, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. This project is also supported by the Jetton Charitable Fund through the Omaha Community Foundation. Special opening night activities are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

About Vincent Van Gogh

Vincent Van Gogh was a Dutch Post-Impressionist painter who is considered among the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art. In just over a decade, he created 2,100 artworks, including approximately 860 oil paintings, most of them in the last two years of his life. His work includes landscapes, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits. His style is characterized by bold colors and dramatic brushwork. His tumultuous life included work as an art dealer and a Protestant missionary. After experiencing health struggles and depression, he took up painting. He was supported in large part by his younger brother, Theo, whom he had frequent correspondence with via letters. It is said that the artist suffered from psychotic episodes and delusions, and often neglected his physical health. He had a tenuous friendship with fellow artist Gauguin, which ended after a confrontation with a razor that famously caused Van Gogh to sever his own left ear. After a period of time spent in psychiatric hospitals, he discharged himself and moved to Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris, to be under the care of the homeopathic doctor Paul Gachet. His depression continued and on July 27, 1890, Van Gogh shot himself. He died from his injuries two days later.

Van Gogh was unsuccessful during his lifetime and was largely considered a madman and a failure. His fame came only after his death.

About Adeline Ravoux

Adeline Ravoux, daughter of the inn-keeper Arthur-Gustave Ravoux who gave Van Gogh lodgings in Auvers-sur-Oise, was 12 years old when Van Gogh arrived in 1890. Adeline modelled for Vincent, along with her younger sister, Germaine. Adeline would comment: "You soon forgot his lack of charm when you watched him amusing the children."

Van Gogh gave the inn-keeper Ravoux two of his paintings, *Auvers Town Hall on 14 July 1890* and the portrait of his daughter, Adeline. In the years following Vincent's death Ravoux felt quite fortunate when a passing American offered him 40 francs for both paintings.

Adeline's memoir of the famous artist, written when she was 76 years old, painted a very different image of the one that circulated after the artist's death. A complete transcript of this memoir can be viewed at http://www.vggallery.com/misc/archives/a_ravoux.htm.

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About The Painting *Portrait of Adeline Ravoux*

During his time in Auvers, Van Gogh rented a room at the inn of Arthur Ravoux, whose daughter was the inspiration for three paintings, although she sat for him only once. Van Gogh depicts Adeline, rather than a photographic resemblance, with “impassioned aspects” of contemporary life through the “modern taste for color.” Van Gogh wrote to his brother: “Last week I did a portrait of a girl about sixteen, in blue against a blue background, the daughter of the people with whom I am staying. I have given her this portrait, but I made a variation of it for you, a size 15 canvas.”

Adeline Ravoux was asked sixty-six years later what she remembered of Van Gogh. Before he painted her portrait, van Gogh had only made polite exchanges of conversation with Adeline. One day, though, he asked her if she would be pleased if he were to do her portrait. After obtaining her parents’ permission, she sat one afternoon in which he completed the painting. He smoked continually on his pipe as he worked, and thanked her for sitting very still. She was very proud to sit for the painting she described as a “symphony in blue”. Van Gogh thought she was sixteen, but she was just thirteen years of age at the time. Adeline sat just once, but three paintings were made of her:

Van Gogh made a copy of the original painting for his brother, with slightly different shades of blue.

In a slightly different pose or aspect, Adeline appears against a background of roses, portions of a still life of roses that he completed just a few days prior to this painting. This painting is owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Neither she nor her parents appreciated Van Gogh’s style and were disappointed that it was not true to life. Yet, even though Adeline was a young girl at the time, pictures of her as a young woman showed that van Gogh painted her as she would become.

In 1988, the portrait sold for \$13.8 million to a private collector.

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.

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