

Chicago's Harris Theater for Music and Dance honors *Joan W. Harris with its Icons and Innovators Gala*

CHICAGO, May 6, 2026—The **Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theater for Music and Dance** honored founder and namesake **Joan W. Harris** on Saturday, May 2, at its *Icons and Innovators Gala*, led by Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and CEO **Lori Dimun**. The spectacular event exceeded its goal, raising nearly \$1.4 million for the theater, and culminated in an exhilarating performance curated by **The Juilliard School** and directed by its President, **Damian Woetzel**, that welcomed some of the biggest names in music, dance, and drama—all affiliated with Juilliard—to the Harris stage. Heartfelt video tributes were also offered during the performance, including notable messages from **President Barack Obama, Governor JB Pritzker, and Senator Dick Durbin** acknowledging Joan Harris as one of the performing arts community's most beloved and admired champions. The sincerity and depth of gratitude for Harris's impact as a longtime trustee of both the Harris Theater and Juilliard was palpable throughout the evening.

In a delightful nod to the versatility of the theater as a performance venue, the gala began with 315 guests ascending the outdoor staircases to the Harris Theater's exquisitely transformed tented rooftop for a cocktail hour and seated dinner. Joan Harris's legacy and impact on the artistic life of the city were on full display, with breathtaking images of key moments in the theater's history incorporated into the decor both at floor level and on panels hung throughout the space.

Harris Theater President and Dimun welcomed attendees by sharing a personal moment she recently had with Harris, describing the gala's gathering of friends and family in her honor as "a collective hug, like a homecoming." These sentiments were eloquently reinforced by gala co-chairs **Ted Grady and Ross Slotten, Caryn and King Harris, and Nancy and Scott Santi**. Santi particularly applauded Harris's tenacity in building the theater 22 years before with her late husband, **Irving B. Harris**, and fellow founders **Sandra P. Guthman** and **Sarah Solotaroff Mirkin**, underscoring the venue's ongoing mission to celebrate its Resident Company program and visiting artists by connecting diverse audiences with outstanding artists from across the city, the nation, and the world. Grady shared his insights on the work of the theater as a dance and music hub, and the need for ensuring a strong future for the institution.

Joan Harris's family offered moving and personal insights, including her nephew, **King Harris**, who told attendees that when he asked Harris about being honored at the gala, "Her first instinct—characteristically—was to say, 'You don't need to honor me.' But what she did say is that she hopes this moment becomes an invitation for all of us in this room to witness the power of transformative giving." Her daughter, **Louise Frank**, expressed gratitude for those in attendance honoring her mother's generosity and lasting impact on the community. Joan Harris's contributions to the State of Illinois were also recognized with a proclamation from Governor Pritzker honoring her civic leadership and urging residents of Illinois to follow her example.

After an imaginative, elevated dinner from J&L Catering, which began with a luxurious lobster-based triptych appetizer and ended with an ingenious deconstructed carrot cake, guests relocated to the Harris Theater's Deering McCormick Hall and were treated to a two-hour performance filled with unique

and vibrant artistic collaborations between extraordinary artists who have walked the halls of The Juilliard School as students, teachers, and creative leaders.

The dynamic showcase of Juilliard-affiliated artists began with actress **Laëtitia Hollard**, from HBO's *The Pitt*, and a charming excerpt from *Everybody* by **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins**, engaging with the audience dressed as a Harris Theater Usher and cleverly drawing the audience's attention to take in the pioneering venue that Joan and Irving Harris opened together in 2003. This was immediately followed by the first of two poignant video tributes from Harris's friends, colleagues, and family, beginning with the surprise tribute from President Obama, who referred to Joan as a "dear, dear friend" and applauded her achievement as the first non-artist to receive the National Medal of Arts, which he personally presented to her in 2013. Governor Pritzker also applauded Joan's remarkable contributions as a philanthropist, and urged fellow Illinoisans to "follow Joan's example and ensure that the Harris Theater continues to provide a home for artists and audiences for generations to come."

Lori Dimun and Damian Woetzel both welcomed the audience and set the tone for an evening filled with stars of the stage and homages to Joan Harris. Juilliard is in the middle of a historic effort to become a tuition-free school for every student in music, dance, or drama, and Woetzel made the announcement that a portion of the artist fees for the evening will generously be donated back to the school to create scholarships in Joan's honor and the participating artists to support future Juilliard students as a part of the tuition-free campaign.

For those in attendance it truly felt like a once-in-a-lifetime event as legendary musicians like pianist **Emanuel Ax**, jazz vocalist **Kurt Elling**, and violinist **Midori** each captivated audiences with their virtuosity, and were joined by leading innovators in their respective musical genres including violist **Nadia Sirota**, along with pianists **Derek Wang** and **Tony Siqi Yun**, jazz pianist **Joe Block**, jazz saxophonist **Jarien Jamanila**, and mezzo-soprano **Lauren Randolph**. The work of some of the world's most celebrated composers like **Philip Glass**, **John Williams**, and **Marvin Hamlisch** was also brilliantly woven into the program, with some composers performing their own works, such as **Caroline Shaw** and **Nico Muhly**. A highlight was the stunning performance of **Jessie Montgomery's** work, introduced by the composer, of *Peace*, performed by cellist **Noah Chen** and pianist **Joshua Mhoon**, both Chicago natives.

Of course, a celebration of Joan Harris and the Harris Theater would not be complete without shining a spotlight on dance and the central role it plays in the venue's artistic vision and mission. Princess Grace Award recipient **Kayla Mak** of **American Ballet Theatre** astounded all gathered in a dance solo by **Juliano Nunes**, dancer **Morgan Clune** joined **Elliot Hammans**—both of Harris Resident Company **Hubbard Street Dance Chicago**—in **Lar Lubovitch's** *Prelude to a Kiss*, and the remarkable **Lounes Landri** of **Gibney Dance** brought to life **Bobbi Jene Smith's** choreography in an excerpt from *Ways of Listening* set to music by Muhly and performed by cellist **Noah Chen**.

Fans of acclaimed actress and playwright **Anna Deavere Smith** were captivated by a personal account of her friendship with Joan Harris. Deavere Smith's remarks heralding Joan Harris's generosity and hospitality were followed by an excerpt from the playwright's *Let Me Down Easy*, performed by actress **Emma Pfitzer Price**.

The evening concluded with a spectacular finale that felt like a full circle from where it began, as Emma Pfitzer Price returned to the house to deliver the closing speech from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, supported by the full company of performers and young vocalists from Chicago's **Merit School of Music Conservatory**.

The Harris Theater is grateful for the generous leadership and support of its *Icons and Innovators* Host Committee and Lead Sponsors:

Event Chairs

Ted Grady and Ross Slotten / Caryn and King Harris / Nancy and Scott Santi

Honorary Chairs

Damian Woetzel, President of The Juilliard School / Lori Dimun, Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and CEO, Harris Theater for Music and Dance

***Icons and Innovators* Performance**

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Photo Captions:

1. Harris Theater for Music and Dance *Icons and Innovators Gala* Co-Chairs Nancy Santi and Ted Grady
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

2. Harris Theater Trustee Ted Grady, Ross Slotten, Scott Santi, Harris Theater Trustee Nancy Santi, Harris Theater Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and Chief Executive Officer Lori Dimun, Ross Dimun, and Harris Theater Trustee Louise Frank
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

3. Chloe Mendel Corgan, Billy Corgan, Harris Theater Trustee Nancy Santi, Ross Dimun, and Harris Theater Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and Chief Executive Officer Lori Dimun
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

4. Cocktail reception for the Harris Theater for Music and Dance *Icons and Innovators Gala*
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

5. Kurt Elling
Photo by Peter Pawinski

6. Harris Theater Trustees Kori Coleman and Sherry Jursa
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

7. Claire and Michael O'Grady
Photo by Peter Pawinski

8. Harris Theater Trustees Nancy Santi and Alexandra Nichols, with Harris Theater Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and Chief Executive Officer Lori Dimun
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

9. Harris Theater Trustee Louise Frank reads State of Illinois proclamation honoring Joan Harris, with King Harris
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

10. Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events Commissioner Kenya Merritt and Harris Theater Trustee Sandra P. Guthman
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

11. Nick Noyes, Susan B. Noyes, Harris Theater Trustee Nancy Santi, Scott Santi
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

12. King Harris, Harris Theater Trustee Caryn Harris, Harris Theater Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and Chief Executive Officer Lori Dimun, Ross Dimun
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

13. Harris Theater Board Chair Peter M. Ellis, Shana Ellis, Manal Ahmad, Eric Reeves
Photo by Kyle Flubacker

14. Harris Theater Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols President and Chief Executive Officer Lori Dimun, D. Carroll Joynes, Harris Theater Trustee Abby McCormick O'Neil, and Harris Theater Trustee Claire O'Grady

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

15. President of The Juilliard School Damian Woetzel

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

16. Midori performs Bach's Violin Partita No.3 in E major

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

17. Jazz pianist Joe Block, dancers Morgan Clune and Elliot Hammans, and vocalist Kurt Elling perform *Prelude to a Kiss*. Choreography by Lar Lubovitch, music by Duke Ellington, lyrics by Irving Gordon and Irving Miles

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

18. Composer Caroline Shaw

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

19. Composer Nico Muhly

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

20. Actress Laëtitia Hollard performs "Disneyland" from *Smile*. Music by Marvin Hamlisch, lyrics by Howard Ashman.

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

21. Pianist Derek Wang and dancer Kayla Mak perform *O'Clock*. Choreography by Juliano Nunes and Music by Philip Glass

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

22. Actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

23. Pianist Emanuel Ax performs Chopin's Nocturne in D-Flat Major

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

24. Curtain call for the Harris Theater's *Icons and Innovators* performance

Photo by Kyle Flubacker

About the Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theater for Music and Dance

The Harris Theater is Chicago's home for music and dance, connecting diverse audiences with artists from across the city, the nation, and the world. An anchor institution of Millennium Park and the first multi-use performance venue built in downtown Chicago since 1929, the Harris was established in 2003 to create a much-needed home for the city's vibrant community of midsize performing arts organizations. Today, the nonprofit Harris Theater features some of the most diverse arts and culture offerings in the city, from its

Chicago-based Resident Companies to the world-renowned visiting artists who perform on its stage through the *Harris Theater Presents* series.

The Harris represents a distinctive model for artistic excellence, collaboration, and creative symbiosis, making the performing arts relevant and accessible to the widest possible audience. Acting as both a home base for and a supportive partner of its Resident Companies, the Harris provides state-of-the-art performance space and ongoing support to more than 30 Chicago-based performing arts organizations. Its 1,500-seat multi-use theater brings innovative and boundary-pushing productions from more than 32 countries across six continents to Chicago, creating unique opportunities for dialogue between Chicagoans and the world's leading artists, thinkers, and innovators. The organization's signature *Harris Theater Presents* series has featured acclaimed artists and ensembles including Joyce DiDonato, Batsheva Dance, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, English National Ballet, Joshua Bell, Monteverdi Choir, Angélique Kidjo, and Paris Opera Ballet. The Theater's education and community engagement initiatives build bridges between artists and community members, providing master classes, artist talks, and free tickets for more than 50 partner organizations throughout Chicago.

To learn more about the Harris Theater, Chicago's home for music and dance in Millennium Park, visit harristheaterchicago.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

About The Juilliard School

Founded in 1905, The Juilliard School is a world leader in performing arts education. The school's mission is to cultivate excellence through the highest caliber of education in music, dance, and drama for gifted students from around the world, so they may achieve their fullest potential, expanding the reach and elevating the impact of the arts. Juilliard is led by Damian Woetzel, seventh president of the school, who has prioritized affordability and access to the highest level of artistic education while championing Juilliard's tradition of excellence. Located at Lincoln Center in New York City, Juilliard offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in dance, drama (acting and playwriting), and music (classical, jazz, historical performance, and vocal arts). More than 800 artists from 42 states and 50 countries and regions are enrolled in Juilliard's College Division, where they appear in more than 800 annual performances in the school's five theaters; at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully and David Geffen halls and at Carnegie Hall; as well as at other venues around New York City, the U.S., and the world. The continuum of learning at Juilliard also includes nearly 400 students from elementary through high school enrolled in the Preparatory Division—Pre-College and Music Advancement Program (MAP); MAP serves students from diverse backgrounds often underrepresented in the classical music field. More than 1,200 students are enrolled in Juilliard Extension, the flagship continuing education program taught both in person and remotely by a dedicated faculty of performers, creators, and scholars. Beyond its New York campus, Juilliard is defining new directions in performing arts education for a range of learners and enthusiasts through a global K–12 educational curricula and preparatory and graduate studies at The Tianjin Juilliard School in China.

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