Next on our stage:

- **MOTHERS AND SONS**
  January 17-February 17

- **EURYDICE**
  March 14-April 14

- **SILENT SKY**
  May 16-June 16

**HIGHLIGHTS**

A companion guide to **Making God Laugh**
by Sean Grennan
November 15-December 23, 2018
Synopsis

Come share the holidays with Ruthie, Bill and the kids. Thirty years of holidays, that is. You’ll laugh, tear up and shudder: sometimes at the “festive” recipes, sometimes at the fashion choices you’ll never admit you also made. Through it all, Ruthie and Bill try to keep the home fires burning as the paths of their three adult children—a priest, an aspiring actress and a smooth-talking entrepreneur—twist and turn. As Woody Allen once said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”

Characters

These character descriptions are taken from playwright Sean Grennan’s delightful Making God Laugh script.

Ruthie (Mary Lou Torre): The matriarch of the family, she starts the play in her late 40s or 50s and ages 30 years (as does everyone). She means well but tries to steer the world more than is humanly possible. She needles her children and even her husband, but at bottom, way down there, truly loves them.

Bill (Bill Davidovich): Our patriarch, he’s a go-with-the-flow sort. Easygoing, wouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings, desperately in love with his kids and his wife. Being the dad of these people and Ruthie’s husband is his life’s work.

Richard (Jeremy Ryan): The eldest son, he starts the play in his mid- to late-20s. He wants to conquer the world, buys the latest everything, and dresses “up to the second” stylish. Perhaps has seen too many movies of how men behave.

Maddie (Maria Giere Marquis): The second child, she’s an aspiring actress and strong-willed person who loves her family. Maddie is closest to Thomas and the two of them have a long-standing habit of picking on their big brother as a team. It’s good-natured except when it’s not. The only one of the kids to have moved away from her hometown, she has a difficult relationship with her mother.

Thomas (Keenan Flagg): Son #2, the baby of the family and the “good” son. A nice, even-tempered guy in the style of his father, who thought his life was on a plan. A devoutly religious man studying for the priesthood at the beginning, he’s funny, warm and not at all rigid in his approach to life.

Above: Ruthie (Mary Lou Torre) and Bill (Bill Davidovich) in “Making God Laugh.”

Left: Thomas (Keenan Flagg) and Maddie (Maria Giere Marquis). Previous page, clockwise from top left: Thomas (Keenan Flagg), Maddie (Maria Giere Marquis), Richard (Jeremy Ryan), Bill (Bill Davidovich) and Ruthie (Mary Lou Torre). All show photos by Taylor Sanders.
A Making God Laugh timeline

As the audience, we travel 30 years with one unforgettable family. We drop in once a decade, on a different holiday each time. The first scene is Thanksgiving 1980, followed by Christmas 1990. Up next is New Year’s Eve 1999-2000. (The fourth scene is a little different. To avoid revealing plot points, let’s just call it “present day.”) Regardless of whether you remember the decades past, it’s fun to add more context by delving into what was happening in the world at the time and what our characters might have been thinking about. Delve with us, won’t you?

Thanksgiving 1980

News events people were talking about
Earlier this month, former California governor and Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan, the Republican challenger, was elected U.S. President over the incumbent, Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

On Thanksgiving Day, the Making God Laugh family’s home team, the Chicago Bears, racked up a win against the Detroit Lions. This no doubt delighted Richard, who predicted the Bears would play in the Super Bowl. (Sorry, Rick. They wouldn’t make the playoffs.)

Earthlings saw the first high-res images of Saturn, after the NASA space probe Voyager I flew the closest to the planet (77,000 miles).

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein announced a holy war against Iran.

Music people were listening to
The biggest hit singles of the year: “Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2) by Pink Floyd, “Woman in Love” by Barbra Streisand, “(Just Like) Starting Over” by John Lennon, “Funkytown” by Lipps Inc. and “Upside Down” by Diana Ross.

The TV they were watching
On Nov. 21, America found out who shot J.R. To be precise, 83,000,000 viewers tuned into the nighttime soap Dallas, though Maddie had probably already guessed it. Dallas topped the charts for 1980-81. Next were The Dukes of Hazzard, 60 Minutes, M*A*S*H and The Love Boat.

The cars they were driving
Top-selling autos in 1980: the Ford Cortina and Ford Escort. The petite Escort stayed popular through financial hard times in the early ’80s as folks sought to pay less at the pump. This year also marked the last model year of the Pinto, which Richard buys in 1990 and heralds as a classic.

What they were wearing
As often happens, the early years of a decade reflect the decade just past. In 1980, we saw a hybrid of disco ’70s and go-go ’80s. While women were still wearing earth-toned turtlenecks, culottes, Annie Hall-style trousers and pantsuits, we also were starting to see hints of the early Madonna-and-miniskirts look that Maddie wears. Gold chains and open collars still hung around: just look at Richard.

The Official Preppy Handbook came out in 1980, so a polo shirt with a popped collar was perfect paired with khakis and Hush Puppies oxfords. A guy could even get away with a three-piece suit in white or powder blue.

As for hair, feathery and shag styles lingered for women. Men’s tresses were often shaggy, like the Korean War soldiers in M*A*S*H who somehow never looked anything like the ‘50s. (It was such a great show that we didn’t care.)
News events
In December 1990, the world's first website and server went live at the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Switzerland. This would have no effect on Ruthie and Bill, who wouldn't buy their first computer for another decade.

The U.S. had gone into recession earlier this year, and the financial squeeze would officially last until spring 1991.

As the Berlin Wall was being demolished, free elections happened in Central and Eastern Europe. Lech Wałęsa won the opening round of Poland's first direct presidential election, and Helmut Kohl became Chancellor of Germany in the first election since the country reunified.

This month, French and British workers building the Channel Tunnel beneath the English Channel would meet for the first time, 40 meters underwater. Well, hello there.

Music
This month, Madonna's video for her pop song “Justify My Love” was banned for its "explicit" sexual content. This would have no effect on Ruthie, who was still listening to Pat Boone.

The biggest hit singles of the year: “Nothing Compares 2 U” by Sinéad O’Connor, “Vogue” by Madonna, “Ice Ice Baby” by Vanilla Ice, “U Can’t Touch This” by MC Hammer and “It Must Have Been Love” by Roxette. Word to your mother.

TV
New faces around the Saturday Night Live halls included Adam Sandler (who began as a writer), Chris Rock and Chris Farley. Top shows of the 1990-91 season: Cheers, 60 Minutes, Roseanne, A Different World and The Cosby Show.

Cars
Sorry to disappoint you, Richard, but we can’t find evidence of the Pinto being stupendously popular in 1990. Instead, Car & Driver magazine named the Honda Accord, the Ford Taurus and the Chevrolet Cavalier as the year's best-selling cars.

Fashion
I heart the '80s indeed. During Christmas 1990, a girl would still have been in style sporting many offerings from the decade just past: pouf dresses, Keds, shorts with slouch socks, babydoll dresses with bike shorts, Doc Martens, and huge sweaters over tight pants. Big hair? High bangs? Yep.

Men's fashions didn’t change as much as women's, but boy did those boys’ hair change. No more shaggy ’70s holdovers: male tresses tended to be J.Crew-short and as conservative as Alex P. Keaton. (We were all still mourning the cancellation of Family Ties the year before.)

On the other hand, stylish guys could grow longer hair if they embraced either the rockstar look or the mullet aesthetic. Do you feel brave, punk? Guys also wore a lot of jeans in 1990, unsurprisingly. They tended to be straight-legged and basic, often paired with polo shirts, denim or leather jackets, or the ubiquitous rugby shirt.
**News events**

If you weren’t packing your trunk with water bottles and converting all your money to gold bars, you were courting disaster. Everyone knew civilization would end in the first minute of 2000 because of the Y2K computer bug. Right?

Meanwhile, it was the lawsuit heard ’round cyberspace. In December 1999, Napster got sued by the Recording Industry Association on charges of copyright infringement, meaning that vintage Weezer could get tougher to download in your basement while you were ordering your Zima from Webvan.

Fortunately, most people had jobs, which made it easier to afford to buy your own music. In the last month of 1999, the United States’ unemployment rate dropped to 4%. That was the smallest number since January 1970.

On Dec. 31, 1999, Boris Yeltsin stepped down as Russia’s president. This meant that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would become acting president without even having to get involved in an election.

**Music**

One of the biggest NYE parties in the Midwest was a concert of 54,000 people gathering in Michigan’s old Pontiac Silverdome to see Metallica, Kid Rock and Ted Nugent play. It was all the rage to ring in the year 2000 with big names. Maddie might have preferred seeing Barbra at the MGM Grand Las Vegas, but family comes first.

As the year ended, these were the top-selling singles of 1999: “…Baby One More Time” by Britney Spears, “Mambo No. 5” by Lou Bega, “Blue (Da Ba Dee)” by Eiffel 65, “No Scrubs” by TLC, and “I Want It That Way” by the Backstreet Boys. By the way, you’ll be able to see the Boys at SAP Center in August 2019.

**TV**

Regis Philbin and his metallic ties ruled the small screen in the 1999-2000 season. The improbably successful game show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* took the first three spots in the Top TV Shows list. First place: Tuesday night. Second place: Thursday night. Third place: Sunday night. Oh, and the other top shows were *ER* and *Friends*.

**Cars**

Just like the previous decade, the Honda Accord and Ford Taurus were among the highest-selling cars of 1999. This year, the Toyota Camry scored an upset victory in the gold-medal spot.

**Fashion**

Bye bye bye, grunge. (That NSYNC song wouldn’t come out until January 2000, but we like to plan ahead.) The flannel-shirt look of the early and mid-’90s had given way to cheerier colors, glittery makeup, slip dresses and capri pants. Even grown women wore tiny hair clips, lip gloss and the occasional headband. Big-name designers were more popular than ever. If you wanted to be really hip, you could match your blue eye shadow to your iMac.

With a new millennium approaching, the high-tech world felt cool, futuristic and accessible. That was reflected in the popularity of glitter and shine in fashion, and the black-leather sleekness of *The Matrix*.

In a 2016 article in *The Guardian*, writer Leigh Alexander wrote about the ongoing popularity of the Y2K aesthetic, and what it meant to her in 1999, the year she graduated from high school: “I felt ready to surf the fiber-option superhighway towards a future where tech was no longer a rare and musty occupation, but a clean, newly made paradise.”
Playwright Sean Grennan: Understanding the arcs of our lives

A 92-pound dog keeps interrupting playwright Sean Grennan. Fortunately, it’s his dog. So Sean has a soft spot for this big sweet mutt named Hank, who really would prefer that his human stop talking on the phone and pet him instead. The hazards and joys of working at home.

While he’s being interviewed for Highlights, Sean is sitting in the cottage that he and his wife, Kathy Santen, own in the Poconos in Pennsylvania. They live in New York, but frequently escape the city for their cottage. He’s been there all week writing. “I’m from the Midwest,” he says. “I have to see a tree every now and then.”

This living situation is apt for the Making God Laugh playwright, who blends Midwest friendliness with big-city stage success. He’s a cheerful interview, clearly happy to have a fruitful career that has allowed him to wear many theatrical hats: playwright, lyricist, librettist and actor. Kathy is also an actor who has been on Broadway for about 12 years in Wicked. That’s what originally brought the couple east from Chicago.

“It was never a dream for me to go to New York,” Sean says. “She and I had just finished doing The Taming of the Shrew opposite each other, and she got cast in Les Mis on Broadway. I said: ‘Why don’t you go to Broadway for six months and say you did it? A lark.’ It’s been 20 years and we’re still larking around.”

Regardless of where he lives or works, Sean is not likely to escape the theater. While he was a star high school athlete, and his mother wanted him to become a priest, neither outcome seemed likely. Especially since Sean’s dad was a TV personality in Chicago, and performing looked very appealing.

Sean was a successful Chicago-based actor for years and still enjoys performing, but his love of theater started translating more into writing when he and Kathy moved to New York.

“It’s a new town and you can kind of reinvent yourself,” he recalls. “I had done some Law & Order and some TV and film, but my interest in it (acting) was waning, and my interest in writing was picking up.”

Sean’s first foray in writing for the stage was as co-librettist for Phantom of the Country Palace in 1995. Now his shows are widely performed, with other titles including the plays Luck!, Beer for Breakfast, As Long As We Both Shall Live and Now and Then. In musicals, he has frequently worked as book writer and lyricist with composer Leah Okimoto; titles include Married Alive!, A Dog’s Life and Another Night Before Christmas.

Making God Laugh premiered at Peninsula Players Theatre in Wisconsin in 2011 and has become a holiday favorite. Sean sees some parallels between the play’s family and his own. He remembers that especially with a TV dad around, “we were always trying to be funny and clever and one-up each other, and sometimes it tipped over into meanness, and that happens in this family, too.”

Another family bonus: Sean’s real-life sister, Erin Noel Grennan, originated the role of daughter Maddie in Making God Laugh. The siblings love working together: Erin also originated the lead role in Sean’s play The Tin Woman, about a woman who receives a heart transplant and later meets the family of the donor. Sean is now working with a team to turn The Tin Woman into a musical.
As an actor, Caitlin Papp is proud to call City Lights home. You’ll remember her as the vivacious organist Cora in *Calendar Girls*, dedicated nurse Anna in *Truce: A Christmas Wish from the Great War*, and merry Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*, to name a few. Now she’s playing a different part: directing at City Lights for the first time.

Though she’s been acting since she played a Christmas stocking in preschool, Caitlin also fell in love with directing while at the Foothill Theatre Conservatory. Inspired by Tom Gough, Janis Bergmann and other local artists, Caitlin found another side of her personality in directing.

“I’m a very amiable person,” she says. “Directing was the first time I had to stand up and be assertive and find that in myself. … I was allowed to fail or succeed in a way I never had.”

After graduation, Caitlin moved to Lake Tahoe, where she directed with The Wild Horse Theatre Company in Carson City. She also started the Carson Valley Children’s Theater, where her directing credits included *The Music Man* and *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Back in the Bay Area, Caitlin performs in many places, but City Lights is a special community. When she’s not on stage, you’ll often see her working as a house manager, checking in patrons and serving as a box-office ambassador. “I always want audiences to feel at home. I believe in this place.”

When she heard that the company needed a director for the holiday show, she immediately emailed executive artistic director Lisa Mallette to throw her name in the ring. It didn’t hurt that she loved the script right away.

“It was the feeling of the best parts of family sitcoms and why we fall in love with those types of families, for their good and bad quirks,” she says. “What I found fun and challenging and exciting was marrying reality and the sitcom world and...
making it live in truth. You have to remember that ridiculous moments happen in real life, too."

Since Caitlin just shared the stage with *Making God Laugh* actors Maria Giere Marquis and Jeremy Ryan in City Lights’ production of *The Merchant of Venice* last year, has it been weird to suddenly be telling them what to do as a director? Not at all, she says. In fact, as an actor she prefers working with directors who are also thespians, like *Merchant* director Kit Wilder. “They know what we need. They’ve been there.”

Caitlin smiles thinking about a recent rehearsal, where she asked her cast, “What props do you need that you don’t have?” They looked relieved. Sometimes as an actor you just need that something in your hand to make a scene complete, and it can be an intuitive need only a fellow performer understands, Caitlin says. “It’s like an empathetic relationship.”

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**The art of horrendous holiday dishes**

by City Lights marketing assistant Carol Alban

The silent villain of *Making God Laugh* is Ruthie’s disaster of an appetizer: Fantasia Dip. This orange mash of who-knows-what is reflective of the art that is bad holiday dishes. If you’re ready to go back in time, hop on this magic school bus of nostalgia with me to revisit classic infamous foods of holiday parties past.

Let’s begin our culinary adventure in the 1930s with ham salad. Start with cooked, cold ham that has been minced or ground. (If you ask my Grandma, she’ll say the best trick is to use the leftover bologna… it’s the Midwest; they always have bologna.) Mix with mayonnaise, Caesar salad dressing, sweet pickles, onions and celery. Once it’s been chilled, the ham blob is garnished with pimento cheese and corn kernels. According to Grandma, this is the best recipe for Christmas. And according to my taste buds, it’s the weirdest version of pig I’ve tasted.

“But, Carol, that doesn’t sound too bad!” Stick with me, folks. We’re just getting started.

Fast-forward to the 1950s. When the food groups were meat, gelatin, dairy and mayonnaise. The ‘50s were a time when people didn’t ask, “Should we put this in jello?” They simply did.

Aspics were all the rage in the ‘50s. (An aspic is more or less a gelatin salad. Basically, a bunch of veggies and meat suspended in a matrix of our good friend, gelatin.) Popular recipes included: cottage cheese and salmon mold, jellied lamb salad, pressed ox tongue, and my personal “I can’t believe we ate that” favorite, Ring-Around-The-Tuna. This advanced aspic calls for vinegar, a mixture of lime and lemon jello, grated onion, pimento, stuffed olives, and two cans of flaked tuna. All in one beautiful Bundt-shaped ring. What did you place in the middle of the ring? More tuna.

In 1974, a new dish started showing up on more holiday menus. It appeared friendly in nature, due to its simple ingredients, but looking back it was nothing more than a Godzilla disaster of an appetizer. Ham and banana hollandaise. Yep, exactly as it sounds. Wrap up eight bananas in boiled ham that has been smothered in mustard, and pour a healthy
dose of extra-cream hollandaise sauce on top. Bake for 6 minutes. Some people on the Internet claim this tastes good. But you know what they say: “Never trust anything you read online.”

We’ve reached the ‘90s! Grunge music and flannels and easy cheese from a can. My favorite funky food from the ‘90s was EZ Squirt ketchup. “But, Carol, ketchup’s not weird!” I know, but it looks weird when it’s purple or green. Green ketchup was all over holiday meals in the ‘90s because the red/green color combination connotes classic Christmas cheer. Did it taste any different? No, but we always eat with our eyes first.

Decades have their own food obsessions. While sausage-and-cheese-filled jello sounds weird to me, maybe in 50 years avocado spread on bread will sound weird to someone else. Even though they’ll be wrong. Avo-toast is delicious.

No matter how you celebrate or which festive dishes you choose, we hope it’s a delicious, delightful season for you and your family.

Happy holidays from City Lights!
City Lights Theater Company presents *Making God Laugh* from Nov. 15-Dec. 23, 2018. Shows are Thurs.-Sat. at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. (no shows Nov. 18 & 22). The theater is at 529 S. Second St. in San Jose. Details: cltc.org, 408-295-4200.

**Making God Laugh**
by Sean Grennan

directed by Caitlin Papp
supported by Producers Sandra Moll & Rick Holden

Director: **Caitlin Papp**
Assistant Director: **Roneet Aliza Rahamim**

Stage Manager: **Charnnee’ Young**
Assistant Stage Manager: **Joseph Hidde**

Scenic Designer/Production Manager/Technical Director: **Ron Gasparinetti**
Lighting Designer: **Mary Baronitis**
Costume Designer: **Melissa Sanchez**

Properties Designers: **Christina Sturken & Miranda Whipple**

Sound Designer: **George Psarras**
Master Electrician: **Joseph Hidde**
Scenic Artist: **Paulino Deleal**

Featuring: **Mary Lou Torre, Bill Davidovich, Jeremy Ryan, Maria Giere Marquis and Keenan Flagg.**

This issue of *Highlights* was researched & written by City Lights dramaturg Rebecca Wallace, except for that awesome section on horrible holiday foods, by marketing assistant Carol Alban. Read past issues, and a digital version of this issue, at cltc.org/highlights.