



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 8, 2025

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Dwayne Hartford to Retire as Childsplay Artistic Director in 2026 After Transformative Decade

*Hartford Prepares to Close 35-year Chapter of Artistic Leadership, Innovation,
and Impact on Arizona's Youth Theatre Landscape*

PHOENIX — Childsplay Artistic Director Dwayne Hartford has announced his plans to retire in September 2026 after 10 years of service. The Board of Trustees has formed a search committee to find his successor.

"Dwayne (Hartford) has taken Childsplay to new heights over the last decade of service," said Board President Gaylord Gagnon. "We are so grateful for everything he's done for Childsplay and the Arizona theatre community and are looking forward to continuing to collaborate in the future."

Hartford led Childsplay through the creation of new works, a performance venue change, and a pandemic, further developed the Childsplay Academy, oversaw the creation of the company's latest mission, as well as expanded access to Childsplay's theatre programs in schools and on tour.

"My partnership with Dwayne (Hartford) over the past 10 years has been a true joy," said Managing Director Steve Martin. "His commitment to Childsplay and the young people we serve has been nothing short of phenomenal. He believes in the capacity of our youth to tackle tough issues while experiencing the great joy of live theatre. While we'll miss him after 35 years with the Childsplay Ensemble, we all wish him grand new adventures as well as a relaxing retirement."

Hartford began his Childsplay career in 1990 when he was hired for a school touring production of "Just So Stories." Since then, he has acted in more than 50 different Childsplay plays and musicals, including originating the role of Father in the world premiere of Founding Artistic Director David Saar's "The Yellow Boat" in 1992.

In addition to acting, Hartford has directed more than 25 Childsplay productions and written several award-winning plays for the company, including "Eric and Elliot," "The Color of Stars," and "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane," among others. He was named Playwright-in-Residence in 2005.



In 2016, Hartford was named the second artistic director of Childsplay after Saar's retirement.

Hartford led Childsplay's transition from its former home, the Tempe Center for the Arts, to its current home, the Herberger Theater Center, during the 2016-17 season. During his tenure, Hartford championed the creation of over a dozen new and original plays that prioritized elevating the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) writers and actors, such as "Chato's Kitchen" by Mark Valdez, "Selena Maria Sings" by Miriam Gonzalez, and "The Hula Hoopin' Queen" by Gloria Bond Clunie.

During the 2020 pandemic, he transformed the way theatre was shared with Arizona's young audiences by developing and producing one-person plays to be performed virtually as "drive-in theatres" in Maricopa County library parking lots and eventually in schools. His final work with the company as artistic director will be a reimagining of "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane" as a musical, premiering in spring 2026.

Hartford was born and raised in rural central Maine. He earned his BFA in Musical Theatre Performance from the Boston Conservatory in 1983, continuing with graduate work in directing at Boston University. From 1985 to 1999, he was the artistic director of the music and theatre program at Quisisana, a summer resort in western Maine.

In the fall of 1989, Hartford moved to Phoenix and soon began working with Childsplay as an actor. During his time in the Valley, Hartford has received numerous awards, including the AriZoni Awards for directing, the American Association of Theatre & Education's Distinguished Play Award (twice), and the 2015 National Society of Arts & Letters, Arizona Chapter Medallion of Merit.

In addition to his work at Childsplay, Hartford has directed for Arkansas Children's Theatre, The Phoenix Theatre Company, Greasepaint, Stagebrush, Valley Youth Theatre, Opera-tunity, and the Phoenix Symphony's production of "Amahl and the Night Visitors" at the Orpheum.

Hartford plans to stay in Phoenix after retiring. His goals are more writing, directing, traveling, and, most importantly, hanging out with his dog, Larry.

About Childsplay

Childsplay, Inc. is a nonprofit theatre company of professional, adult artists who perform for and teach young audiences and their families. The mission of Childsplay is to create theatre so strikingly original in form, content, or both that it instills in young people an enduring awe, love, and respect for the medium, thus preserving imagination and wonder, the hallmarks of childhood, which are keys to the future. For more information, visit www.childsplayaz.org.