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CONTACT: Lydia Baxter
Public Relations Associate
(941) 366 – 9017 ext. 338
Lbaxter@floridastudiotheatre.org
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**FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE CELEBRATED PLAYWRIGHTS
AND GRANT SPELMAN AWARD ON FEBRUARY 25**

(Sarasota, FL) —On Monday, February 25, artists and supporters of Florida Studio Theatre flocked to the theater for its annual fundraiser, the *Denim & Diamonds Shindig*. Long-time FST supporter Marie G. Kropp chaired the event, and Gulf Coast Community Foundation supported the Shindig as its lead sponsor. With live, exclusive entertainment, the presentation of the distinguished Spelman Award, and a plated three-course dinner, FST's *Denim & Diamonds Shindig* was a not-to-be-missed event for many of the greatest supporters of the arts and contemporary theatre in Sarasota.

Donning their best denim and glitzy attire, with some added Western flair, attendees added to the festive and lively atmosphere. The event kicked off with a cocktail hour buzzing with activity—guests outside line danced, while a musical improv performance erupted inside. Fiddler Amber Svetik traveled throughout the event, providing live music as guests munched on gourmet popcorn, themed appetizers, and sipped on specialty cocktails from cowboy boot shaped glassware. FST Improv performed short sets in FST's Court Cabaret throughout the cocktail hour.

Following the cocktail hour, guests gathered in FST's Gompertz Theatre for special performances from the casts of *Guitar Girls* and *The Wonder Years*, and the presentation of the annual Spelman Award. Named in honor of FST Founding Artistic Director, John Spelman, the Spelman Award is presented to an individual or corporate sponsor who has demonstrated extraordinary leadership through philanthropic support, stewardship, and service.

This year's award went to Wendy and Bob Grady for their unparalleled support of FST's Winter Season programming and award-winning WRITE A PLAY program. Because of their generosity, FST has been able to expand its WRITE A PLAY program to Camden, New Jersey, one of the country's most impoverished cities. Through this gift, three of FST's top teaching artists held a week-long residency at Camden's Holy Name School, where they taught students the fundamentals of playwriting and worked with them to craft their own plays.

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“Most importantly for us, FST is about children. Not just the children in all of us, but the real little ones. Bob and I both started out as teachers, so we love that FST gets to so many kids,” said Bob and Wendy Grady. “FST’s WRITE A PLAY program reaches over 47 thousand students, K through 12 every year and, in its 28-year run, has instructed and inspired over 1 million kids to create their own original plays. Through all of FST’s important programs, children are provided with the tools to discover their own personal creative abilities; they get the chance to develop a stronger sense of who they are as unique individuals; and they are given an avenue for expression they ordinarily may not experience.”

Between musical sets, Managing Director Rebecca Hopkins and Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins spoke about the importance of making theatre as affordable and accessible to as many people as possible. “Our programming strives to reflect the values of Americans, regardless of race, age, income, religion, gender, or sexual orientation,” said Richard Hopkins. “Our variety of programming encourages us to play to everyone, to include everyone. Our programming is purposefully diverse, and thoughtfully inclusive.”

“We are creating an artistic home for all people. A theatre that is filled with plays of diversity of thought and is open to all,” added Hopkins. “A theatre that holds the thoughts of many and serves all of us...together, in this artistic home, we will explore what it means to be alive.”

New Play Development is the lifeblood of FST and is a year-round activity that is fully integrated with each of the theatre’s other programs. During the ceremony, a paddle raise was held to raise money for FST’s newest play initiative, The Playwrights Collective, in order to provide additional support to playwrights during the creative process. The money raised through this will provide actors, directors, artistic staff, and audiences with whatever they need during a play’s development process.

Once the ceremony concluded, guests enjoyed conversation and comradery over a delicious dinner catered by Michael’s on East. By the end of the evening, everyone was in good spirits and left the doors of Florida Studio Theatre with complimentary trail mix and custom chocolates in hand.

ABOUT FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE

Known as Sarasota’s Contemporary Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre was founded in 1973 by Artist Jon Spelman. Starting out as a small touring company, FST traveled to places such as migrant camps and prisons. The company then acquired the former Woman’s Club building, becoming the first permanent venue. Shortly after Richard Hopkins arrived, the building was purchased and renamed The Keating Theatre. In the years that followed, Florida Studio Theatre established itself as a major force in American Theatre, presenting contemporary theatre in its five theatre venues: the Keating Theatre, the Gompertz Theatre, the Parisian style Goldstein Cabaret and John C. Court Cabaret, and Bowne’s Lab Theatre.

Even with its growth, Florida Studio Theatre remains firmly committed to making the arts accessible and affordable to a broad-based audience. FST develops theatre that speaks to our living, evolving,

and dynamically changing world. As FST grows and expands, it continues to provide audiences with challenging, contemporary drama and innovative programs.

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