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### **Victory Gardens Artistic Director of 34 Years Dennis Začek Announces Retirement**

Chicago—Artistic Director **Dennis Začek** today announces plans for his retirement from Victory Gardens, after 34 years at its artistic helm. Začek will continue his tenure through spring 2011, as the board conducts a national search for his successor. He will remain with the company as Artistic Director Emeritus and plans to remain active as an actor, director and board member.

In the past season alone, Victory Gardens, under Začek's artistic leadership, has celebrated major accomplishments and milestones. Victory Gardens broke its box office record last summer with the smash hit *Blackbird*, directed by Začek and starring William Petersen (who received his Equity card at Victory Gardens) and Mattie Hawkinson. This season, from its first IGNITION festival, Victory Gardens produced two world premieres—*The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* by Kristoffer Diaz and *Year Zero* by Michael Golamco; both productions went on to New York and *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. On March 1, the newly completed studio theater was named the Richard Christiansen Theater with a tribute to the beloved and former Tribune Arts Critic Richard Christiansen. On Broadway, *Red* by Victory Gardens Playwright ensemble member John Logan, won six 2010 Tony Awards, including Best Play.

"We have much to celebrate at VG. After 34 years with Victory Gardens, I look forward to my continued involvement with the theater in a new capacity," says **Začek**. "Even John Wayne knew when to get off the horse and on to the buckboard."

"How do you replace an icon? It is a daunting task," comments **Board President Jeffrey Rappin**. "Dennis has been the driving force behind Victory Gardens practically since its inception. With all the wonderful moments that he has brought to Victory Gardens, and to Chicago theater as a whole, he will be sorely missed. This will be a watershed event for Victory Gardens, but the good news is that Dennis will continue to be involved with VG and the board, as a director and maybe even an actor again."

*Chicago Tribune* chief critic emeritus **Richard Christiansen** says, "In Dennis Začek, you will find the past, present and future of the Chicago theater community. He was instrumental in forming the creation of the Off Loop movement. He has been and is an enduring force in carrying forward the vast, rich resident theater bounty we enjoy today. And his leadership, at Victory Gardens in particular and in the theater community at large, from the very start to the present embodies the visionary spirit that inspires and continues to inform the work of theater artists in Chicago."

**William Peterson** comments, "For almost forty years Dennis Začek has been at the center of Chicago Theatre. His encouragement, influence and development of Chicago

playwrights, actors, directors and designers has been an immense gift to our city. He was my mentor. Without him, I would very likely not have become an actor. Because of him, I have certainly become a better man."

**Kevin Anderson** adds, "Dennis has been in my corner from the very start of my career, even before I finished acting school. Later at Victory Gardens he, along with Sandy Shinner, gave me my first role in a play as a professional Equity actor. He has since shown interest in me not only as an actor and artist, but also loving concern for me in developing as a whole man and human being. He's a good friend, nurturing mentor, man of his word, and wise man of very high ideals and integrity."

Dennis Začek began working with the company in 1977 and has directed more than 250 productions in his career. As the artistic leader of the company, he established a playwrights ensemble of 14 members. Across the ensemble, virtually every major accolade has been bestowed on its members, including the Tony Award, Emmy Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The accomplishments of the theater and its ensemble led to receiving the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre in 2001, and local and national media have recognized Victory Gardens as one of the most important playwriting theaters in the country. These accolades propelled the company, under Začek's leadership, to renovate the historic Biograph Theater, a new state of the art facility which includes the Začek McVay Theater, the Richard Christiansen Theater, a rehearsal room, and administrative offices.

Dennis Začek recently accepted the Actors' Equity Association's (AEA) Spirit of Diversity Award, which is given to institutions that "have made non-traditional casting a way of life." He also received the 2005 Jeff Award for Outstanding Achievement in Chicago Equity Theatre and the 2004 Artistic Leadership Award from the League of Chicago Theatres. Začek and Marcelle McVay, his wife and former VG Managing Director, received the 1999 Rosetta Lenoire Award from Actors' Equity and the 1998 Sidney R. Yates Arts Advocacy Award from the Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation.

Most recently Začek directed the world premiere of James Sherman's *Jacob and Jack*; the Chicago premiere of *Blackbird* by David Harrower; the world premiere of Jeffrey Sweet's *Class Dismissed*; James Sherman's *Relatively Close*; the Midwest premiere of *A Park in Our House* by Nilo Cruz; the world premieres of *Cynical Weathers* by Douglas Post; *Denmark* by Charles Smith, the inaugural production at Victory Gardens' new home at the Biograph; *Symmetry* by David Field; *The Family Gold* by Annie Reiner; *Affluenza!* and *The Old Man's Friend* by James Sherman; *Unspoken Prayers* by Claudia Allen; and *The Action Against Sol Schumann* and *Flyovers* by Jeffrey Sweet.

Additional projects include Marisha Chamberlain's *Scheherazade* (National Winner of the FDG/CBS competition), John Olive's *Clara's Play* (production and direction award, Academy of Theater Artists and Friends), and James Sherman's *Mr. 80%* (direction award, Academy of Theater Artists and Friends). He directed Arthur Cantor's production of James Sherman's *Beau Jest* at the Lambs Theater in New York, where it holds the record as the longest-running show in the history of the theater. Other New York credits include Lonnie Carter's *The Sovereign State of Boogedy Boogedy*, presented by Woody King's New Federal Theater, and Charles Smith's *Jelly Belly*, which was produced by the New Federal Theater. Mr. Začek is a professor emeritus of Loyola University and was included in 2005 in *Utne Magazine's* first-ever list of "Artists Who Will Shake the World."

### **About Victory Gardens Theater**

Under the leadership of Artistic Director **Dennis Začek** and Executive Director **Jan Kallish**, Victory Gardens Theater is home to the bold voices of world premiere theater. The company features the work of its own 14-member Playwrights Ensemble, as well as that of exciting playwrights who are changing theater in the U.S. and abroad. Since its founding in 1974, the company has produced more world premieres than any other Chicago theater, a commitment

recognized nationally when Victory Gardens received the 2001 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre. The company's dedication to developing, supporting and producing new work makes Victory Gardens an American Center for New Plays.

In 2006, Victory Gardens completed an \$11.8 million renovation of Chicago's famed Biograph Theater, one of the city's most celebrated historic landmarks. Renamed Victory Gardens Biograph Theater, this beautiful new space is home to two theaters which expand the company's artistic flexibility, and provides very different audience experiences. The Začek McVay Theater is a state-of-the-art 299 seat space. The new Richard Christiansen Theater is an intimate 109 seat space, named in honor of the *Chicago Tribune* chief critic emeritus and longtime champion of Chicago's live theater scene. This theater was dedicated with a moving tribute in March 2010 which included the launch of Victory Gardens \$1 Million *Campaign for Growth*. Visit [www.victorygardens.org/campaignforgrowth](http://www.victorygardens.org/campaignforgrowth) for more information.

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For complete information, visit [www.victorygardens.org](http://www.victorygardens.org).

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