

# ARTS + CULTURE

## She just won an Emmy. Next: A book revealing her KC roots

BY ROB OWEN  
Special to The Star

Taylor Kay Phillips is now an Emmy-winning writer on HBO's "Last Week Tonight With John Oliver," but just a year ago she was still collecting rejection letters from late-night shows she'd applied to.

It was a practice she started early growing up in Kansas City, and she credits her father, Cary Phillips, with helping her gain proper perspective.

"I auditioned for Starlight (Theatre) and never ended up in shows there," Phillips, 29, recalls. "They had a children's chorus audition when I was 9 and they sent a rejection letter, a physical rejection letter, to my house. And my father said, 'Oh my gosh, it's here, we have to frame it! This is the first one!' That was my family's attitude toward rejection: It means you're trying, the idea of being in the arena. ... It doesn't mean that rejections aren't allowed to hurt — there was always a safe place to be sad about it — but there was pride to take in the idea of continuing to be out there."

Phillips has been out there plugging away ever since.

She was hired earlier this year as a writer on "Last Week Tonight" (airing 10 p.m. Sundays and streaming on HBO Max). And, never forgetting her Kansas City roots, she has a book coming out next spring, "A Guide to Midwestern Conversation." (More on that below.)

Helping to script John Oliver's topical weekly show requires writers do more than simply pitch jokes.

"I love the learning that we get to do on the show just by virtue of being a part of it," Phillips says. "We learn so much about these topics and we get the benefit of that immediate release where we get to say something and it can be irreverent. In fact, it should be irreverent."

It's the job of all late-night writers to learn to write in the voice of the show's star, but that doesn't mean foregoing their own instincts.

"The proudest moments that I have and the most gratifying are when the joke that I would tell and the joke that would come out of John's mouth are the same," Phillips says. "It's just really fun to feel like you're still connected to your own comedic voice even when the person saying the things that you write is very, very much not you."

"Last Week Tonight" is particularly secretive among late-night shows when it comes to divulging how the comedy sausage gets made, but she notes Oliver has said main

SEE EMMY, 2C



MINDY TUCKER

Taylor Kay Phillips shows off a quintessential Midwest saying, "Ope, lemme just sneak past ya." Her "Guide to Midwestern Conversation" comes out in April.

### How's it going, Midwesterners?

"A Guide to Midwestern Conversation" by Taylor Kay Phillips, coming April 11 from Ten Speed Press, offers phrases Midwesterners might say — and what they really mean. A sampling:

● "Didja see the game last night?": We do not have a lot in common, so I am most comfortable in conversations where we are either exchanging opinions about [our hometown team] or recapping their latest performance. I will insist that we go to/watch the next one together. First Bud Light's on me

● "It's almost time to start decorating for the fall!": Hold on to your hats. I spend nine months of the year getting ready for these three months. I threw out my child's baby clothes so I could fill our entire keepsake closet with fall leaf garlands, multicolored gourds, and little stuffed animals that

hold up the chalk boards where I write "FALL in love" in perfect calligraphy. (I took a class at the community center!) This is my Olympics. My American Royal. My Grand Finale of Season 243 of *The Voice*. If I see someone whose home is inadequately ornamented, I will invite them to help themselves to my closet.

● "Hey there, how's it going?": I want to know how you are doing so that I can respond in an empathetic and appropriate way. Acceptable answers range from "good, thanks!" to "I just lost my uncle to prostate cancer and I'm unsure how to divide his estate with my mentally unstable brother." Either way, I want to hear about it and offer specific and targeted support and follow up.

● "Hi there.": I am either furious with you or in an incredible hurry. If we ever cross paths again, I will "apologize for being so short before" and give a detailed explanation for my behavior.

### THE CLASSICAL BEAT

## Ballet presents work that took Paris by storm 181 years ago

BY PATRICK NEAS  
Special to The Star



Many ballet companies around the country present "Giselle," but it's hard to imagine that any of them have an artistic director as steeped in Adolphe Adam's ballet as Devon Carney.

His Kansas City Ballet will present an authentic production of "Giselle" for six performances, beginning Oct. 14 at the Muriel Kauffman Theatre.

Carney has an intimate knowledge of "Giselle" like few others. He's been involved in this quintessential work of the Romantic era since he was a young dancer of 16 attending an arts high school in New Orleans.

"I was able to dance the peasant pas de deux on the school cafeteria floor with squished peas and brownies, and that was tons of fun," Carney said. "And the New Orleans Ballet, which was connected to the school, performed the ballet a few times during my educational years. I think we did it twice."

At New Orleans Ballet, Carney learned "Giselle" from Harvey Hysell, who was taught by Vincenzo Celli, who in turn was taught by Enrico Cechetti, famous for his work with the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia and developer of the Cechetti Method. It is this great ballet lineage that Carney brings to "Giselle," as well as a long history of actually performing the work himself when he was a principal dancer with Boston Ballet.

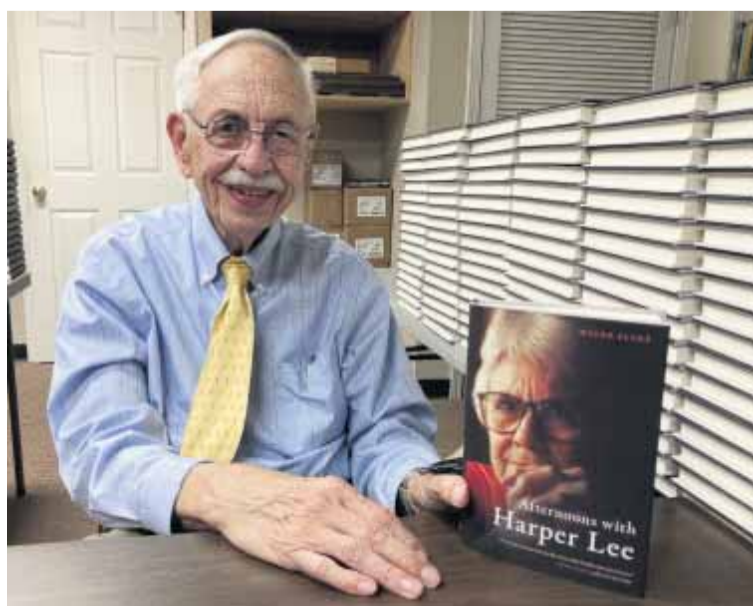
"When I got the job with Boston Ballet, gee, I don't even know how many times we did 'Giselle,' but I danced every role there is that a guy can dance: a peasant,

SEE NEAS, 2C



Kansas City Ballet

The Kansas City Ballet will perform the ghostly "Giselle" in October.



JAY REEVES AP

Alabama historian Wayne Flynt holds a copy of his new book, "Afternoons with Harper Lee," about the late author of "To Kill a Mockingbird," at a book-signing in Homewood, Ala., on Sept. 22. Flynt and his late wife were friends with Lee, who died in 2016.

## Book shows personal side of 'Mockingbird' author Harper Lee

BY JAY REEVES  
Associated Press

HOMEWOOD, ALA.

To the world, Harper Lee was aloof to the point of being unknowable, an obsessively private person who spent most of her life avoiding the public gaze despite writing one of the best-selling books ever, "To Kill a Mockingbird." To Wayne Flynt, the Alabama-born author was his friend, Nelle.

Flynt, a longtime Southern historian who became close friends with Nelle Harper Lee late in her life, has written his second book about the author,

"Afternoons with Harper Lee," which was released recently with Flynt signing copies at a bookstore in suburban Birmingham.

Based on Flynt's notes from dozens of visits with Lee over a decade before her death in 2016, the book is like sitting on a porch and hearing tales of Lee's childhood and family in rural Alabama, her later life in New York and everything in between. That includes the time a grandfather who fought for the Confederacy survived the Battle of Gettysburg despite heavy losses to his Alabama unit, according to Flynt.

"I told her, 'You know, half the 15th of Alabama was either

killed or wounded or captured, and he got away? Is that just luck or the providence of God? What in the world is that?'" Flynt said in an interview with The Associated Press.

"And she said, 'No, it's not the providence of God. He could run fast.'"

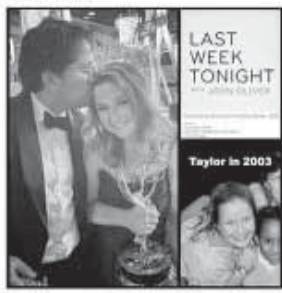
The public perception of Lee as a hermit is wrong, Flynt, a former history professor at Auburn University, said. No, she didn't do media interviews and she guarded her privacy zealously, but she also was warm and kind to friends that included a former first lady, Lady Bird

SEE LEE, 3C

Theatre of the Imagination  
September 13 at 2:35 PM - 18

We are so proud of one of our former students, Taylor Kay Phillips. She won an Emmy for Outstanding Writing for Last Week Tonight with John Oliver!

Taylor was a star at Theatre of the Imagination back in the early days, and always took the spotlight. Way to go, Taylor! You are the best!



Facebook screenshot

On Facebook, Theatre of the Imagination gave a shoutout to its Emmy-winning alum, Taylor Kay Phillips.

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stories each week are usually the culmination of six weeks' worth of work.

"The deep dives on the topic are sometimes really fruitful for joke writing, because you've spent a lot of time in the world of this topic," Phillips says, which encourages the show's writers to dig deeper for less-mined jokes. For instance, a photo of Leonardo DiCaprio on screen may set viewers up to expect a joke about the actor dating 24-year-olds, but it's incumbent upon the "Last Week Tonight" writers to do better. "When you're looking at it for the umpteenth time, that's when you say, what's on the wall behind that guy? You want to give (the audience) something that surprises them."

### GOING TO THE EMMY AWARDS

Due to COVID-19, "Last Week Tonight" writers work from home and collaborate online, so Phillips "saw Oliver's legs for the first time" at the Primetime Emmy Awards in September. A week prior, she and her husband, "Late Show With Stephen Colbert" writer Felipe Torres Medina, attended the Creative Arts Emmy Awards, where both were nominees. Phillips won as part of the writing team for "Last Week Tonight."

"It felt like a very cool, special thing that also felt a little bit fake. Not that the people were fake, nothing like that," Phillips says, but she kept expecting someone to yell, "Cut! Excellent job performing glamour, but you're a comedy writer, please put on your sweats and go

back to your room!"

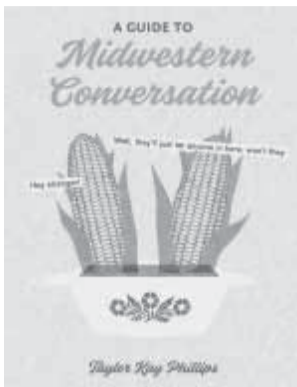
Attending the Creative Arts Emmys ceremony also took Phillips back to her Kansas City youth playing basketball, though not in a good way.

"I was debating whether to tell you this but I am: My heels were too high and I fell in the lobby of the Creative Arts Emmys. Twice!" she says. "So I took them off and everything from there on — accepting the Emmy, doing press, taking pictures — I was fully barefoot. But then the swelling didn't go down."

Phillips went to a Los Angeles podiatrist who determined she sprained her ankle and, oh by the way, when she thought she sprained her ankle playing basketball in high school, she actually broke it and there's a piece of bone hanging off her ankle.

"It made me feel better because it's not just that I can't walk in heels," Phillips says. "It's not that I am completely incapable of any type of glamour whatsoever."

Phillips played basketball for 12 years growing up in Kansas City. A 2011 graduate of The Barstow School, located in walking distance from her south Kansas City childhood home, Phillips decided by her sophomore year she wasn't going to try to get recruited to play basketball in college "which came partially from realizing that there were people who felt about sports the way that I felt about performing and writing. And partially it came from not growing anymore and I would have had to change positions. I did not want to be a college point guard,



Ten Speed Press

"A Guide to Midwestern Conversation" by Kansas Citian Taylor Kay Phillips is due out April 11.

not even a little bit."

Phillips leaned into her performing arts interests, which had been there all along, beginning with her involvement with Overland Park's Theatre of the Imagination since second grade. She also read books written by comic actors Mindy Kaling and Tina Fey, learning that "everyone's path to the job that I have is so individual. There really is no one track."

At Harvard, Phillips majored in English, with a minor in dramatic arts. She wasn't a Harvard Lampoon writer, instead focusing on musical theater productions.

"I knew I was not good enough at musical theater to do it at the highest level, so I was, like, 'This is gonna be the last time I'm able to do this,' so I put a lot of my heart and my energy into that and I'm very, very glad that I did," Phillips says.

### LAUNCHING A CAREER

In 2015 after graduating from Harvard, Phillips moved to New York — at age 10 after a trip to 30 Rock, she promised herself she'd someday live in NYC — and eventually worked in advertising while taking comedy classes at night (where she met her hus-



TESSIA PHILLIPS

Taylor Kay Phillips says September's Emmy ceremony felt unreal. She kept expecting someone to yell, "Cut! Excellent job performing glamour, but you're a comedy writer, please put on your sweats and go back to your room!"



JAE C. HONG Invision/AP

John Oliver had plenty to be happy about. "Last Week Tonight With John Oliver" won the Emmy Award for best variety talk series for the seventh year in a row on Sept. 12. The week before, the show won for best writing for a variety series.

band in 2016) and writing on the side for respected publications (The New Yorker, McSweeney's).

She returned home to perform in two original Kansas City Fringe Festival shows: "A Moment of Your Time" in 2015 with her sister, Tessia Phillips (currently based in Seattle and producer for the musical comedy troupe Baby Wants Candy), and a solo show in 2017, "I Can Rap the Raven."

William Morris literary agent Andrea Blatt, who was one year below Phillips during their time at Barstow, reached out to Phillips every six months or so to compliment one of her tweets and then said, "Let me know if you

ever have a book idea."

Phillips did have an idea, an expansion on articles she'd written for McSweeney's in 2018 where she would take a common phrase and offer the Midwestern subtext. For instance, she wrote, when Midwesterners say "Those kids have a lot of energy," they really mean: "MONSTERS THEY ARE MONSTERS. I have never once requested compensation for babysitting them."

Blatt helped Phillips format and refine a book proposal, which they sold to Ten Speed Press in May 2021. The ad agency Phillips was working at let her take a month's leave to drive around the Midwest last fall doing research for "A Guide to Midwestern

Conversation." It's due out April 11.

She's still deeply connected to her hometown, as her Twitter feed reveals, with tweets about the Chiefs, KC Current and the New York City mayor's sneer that "Kansas doesn't have a brand."

For years while she worked her day job, Phillips developed a network in the New York comedy scene and applied for jobs writing for late-night TV shows including "Conan," "Colbert," "The Break With Michelle Wolf" and "Game Theory With Boman Jones."

Last December she was invited to apply and put together a submission packet for "Last Week Tonight," a show she had written sample scripts for as a 22-year-old New York newbie taking classes at Upright Citizens Brigade comedy theater.

"That had always been the dream," says Phillips. She got hired in February, started working on "Last Week Tonight" two weeks later and already has that Emmy to show for it. Phillips keeps her trophy nestled between her husband's Peabody and WGA (Writers Guild of America) awards (from his writing work on Colbert's show) "so that combined we have a PEW! Our goal as a couple is to eventually have a PEW! PEW! and the exclamation point is a healthy, happy marriage, of course."

Phillips says getting to where she is in her career takes hard work but attributes 15% of her success to luck.

"I honestly expected there to be a lot more steps in between an ad job and this job," Phillips says. "When you're doing the work, you don't think, 'And then one day, I'm gonna get to go to the Emmys!' You do the work thinking, 'And then one day I'm gonna get up and my job is going to be to write comedy for the TV.' And the morning of the Emmys? I did wake up and think, 'I would like to win an Emmy today,' but that was the only day that that was the dominant thought instead of 'I cannot believe that this (comedy-writing career) has happened to me.'"

Freelance writer Rob Owen: [RobOwenTV@gmail.com](mailto:RobOwenTV@gmail.com) or on Facebook and Twitter as RobOwenTV.

FROM PAGE 1C

## NEAS

Hilarion and, of course, Albrecht," Carney said.

"Giselle" was first performed in Paris in 1841, when the Romantic era was in full swing. Romanticism was a reaction to the Age of Enlightenment and its overemphasis on science and rational thought. With its supernatural plot involving Wilis, the ghosts of women who were betrayed by their lovers and died unmarried, "Giselle" definitely appealed to the Romantic taste for the fantastic.

"When it was premiered, there was a hairstyle that was used for the role of Giselle and for other women in the show that was nicknamed 'The Giselle,'" Carney said. "Within two days, every hair salon in Paris was being asked to do that hairstyle. I would have loved to have seen what that was like. Just imagine women going to the hair salon saying, 'I want a 'do like that girl that played Giselle.'"

In Carney's production, all of the women have their hair done in a chignon, the true name for the low-bun hairstyle. The female dancers also wear distinctive longer tutus.

"When we get to the Romantic era, we're getting to this dreamy sort of quality, and those dresses are one of the things that epitomizes Romantic ballet," Carney said. "They are actually called

Romantic tutus because they are from the Romantic era. Regular tutus, like those used in the later 19th century, in works like 'Swan Lake,' are called classical tutus."

Carney's quest for authenticity extends to the way the dancers move.

"I'm literally having to reteach the dancers how to lift their arms, how to approach an arabesque," Carney said. "It was considered rude for women to lift their legs 90 degrees. Another probable reason for the Romantic tutu was to cover themselves when their legs were lifted higher. So I'm always telling the dancers, 'Please, legs lower, legs lower. No high arabesques. And also arms lower. There was a much more subtle movement quality in the arms, which you will see from the women, especially in some of the waltzes in the first act.'"

Usually for story ballets, Carney alternates two casts during the run of the show. This time, he decided to go with three casts because, as Carney says, "'Giselle' is an extremely great opportunity to give our dancers an opportunity for artistic growth."

The title role will be danced by Kaleena Burks, Emily Mistretta and Amaya Rodriguez. "Giselle" is a ballet that is preserved in amber, but Carney says that each dancer will be able to



File photo

Conductor Marin Alsop will make her Kansas City debut in October.

bring her own interpretation to the role without "going off the rails."

"Emily comes from Boston Ballet, where she saw 'Giselle' a lot, but never had a chance to perform the lead role, but she certainly did the supporting roles," Carney said. "Amaya danced Giselle with the National Ballet of Cuba, where Alicia Alonso was. She has her own unique interpretation. Then there's Kaleena, who has been with the company one year longer than me, so we've been together for 10 seasons. She was an understudy when we did 'Giselle' the first time in 2015."

To help the dancers fine-tune their performance, Carney is bringing in Elaine Bauer, who was a principal dancer with Boston Ballet, where she was especially noted for her Giselle.

"Elaine was born in the wrong century," Carney said. "It's very important to me that the women get

the experience of being exposed to somebody who has a rich, rich history of that particular role. And, of course, the men get me."

"Giselle" is a rarefied cultural experience, and Kansas City is lucky to get such an authentic production, but how will a 21st century audience used to reality television and short TikTok videos respond to such a strange, almost surreal ballet?

"When we get down to it, it's about emotional content and having an audience able to connect with a variety of different feelings in the course of an evening, and 'Giselle' kind of hits them all," Carney said. "To me, 'Giselle' is like a great Rembrandt or a beautiful Renoir or Monet. It's pretty phenomenal that we still have the opportunity to see a ballet like this."

**7:30 p.m. Oct. 14, 15, 21 and 22 and 2 p.m. Oct. 16 and 23. Muriel Kauffman Theatre,**

**Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. \$34-\$143. 816-931-8993 or [kcballet.org](http://kcballet.org)**

### MARIN ALSOP

A lot of people have been waiting for the Kansas City debut of Marin Alsop, and now it is at hand. The Harriman-Jewell Series will present Alsop conducting Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo on Oct. 10 at Helzberg Hall.

The centerpiece of the program is Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral showpiece "Scheherazade," but perhaps even more exciting is the selection of works by Brazilian Heitor Villa Lobos, an important and fantastic composer whose music seems to be rarely heard in concert.

**7 p.m. Oct. 10. Helzberg Hall, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. \$15-\$85. 816-415-5025 or [hjseries.org](http://hjseries.org).**

### MAXIM VENGEROV

It's a busy week for the Harriman-Jewell Series. On Oct. 16, it will present Russian-born Israeli violinist Maxim Vengerov in recital at the Folly Theater. With a slew of awards and honors ranging from a Grammy to a Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum, Vengerov is considered by many one of the greatest living violinists. His program will include music by Bach, Beethoven, Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky.

**6 p.m. Oct. 16. Folly Theater, 300 W. 12th St.**

**\$15-\$85. 816-415-5025 or [hjseries.org](http://hjseries.org).**

### KANSAS CITY CHORALE

The Grammy-winning Kansas City Chorale conducted by Charles Bruffy starts its new season with a journey to the Far East. "Travels of Marco Polo" Oct. 14 at Helzberg Hall will feature a real rarity, Missa ad te levavi by the Renaissance Spanish composer Bartolomeo Escobedo, as well as Chinese Folk Songs by Chinese-born Kansas City composer Chen Yi.

**8 p.m. Oct. 14 at Helzberg Hall, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. \$23.50-\$38.50. [kchorale.org](http://kchorale.org).**

### MUSICA SACRA

Timothy McDonald and Musica Sacra deserve plaudits for presenting sacred works hardly ever heard in concert. For example, on Oct. 16, they will perform the Mass in G, D. 167 by Franz Schubert and the cantata "Alles was ihr tut" by Dietrich Buxtehude at Arrupe Hall at Rockhurst University. McDonald, an engaging music professor, will present his always-enlightening live program notes at 6:45 p.m.

**7:30 p.m. Oct. 16, Arrupe Hall, Rockhurst University, 100 Rockhurst Road. Free. [tinyurl.com/3pbwsddd](http://tinyurl.com/3pbwsddd).**

You can reach Patrick Neas at [patrickneas@kcartbeat.com](mailto:patrickneas@kcartbeat.com) and follow his Facebook page, KC Arts Beat, at [www.facebook.com/kcartbeat](http://www.facebook.com/kcartbeat).