

The Second STAGE

Michael Ruffolo, a retired corporate tech executive, takes on a new role as a playwright

BY MARC APPLEMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK SHIRGHIO

Shot on location at TheatreZone, Naples





MARK DANNI, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THEATREZONE, AND MIKE RUFFOLO POSE WITHIN THE VENUE WHERE RUFFOLO'S PLAY, *BARCELONA: THE MUSICAL*, WILL DEBUT FEBRUARY 4, 2027.

It is only fitting that Michael (Mike) Ruffolo would combine his entrepreneurial spirit, technology background, passion for health and fitness, and love of musical theater during the moment he had the inspiration to write his first musical. On April 19, 2019, the longtime Naples resident was riding his high-tech ElliptiGO bike while listening to "Barcelona," a duet from Freddie Mercury, the frontman of rock band Queen, and operatic soprano Montserrat Caballé (both of whom are now deceased). About halfway into his 40-mile ride, Ruffolo pulled off the road, sat on the ground, started thinking of images of Barcelona, and spent the next three hours on his phone writing the first draft of what would become *Barcelona: The Musical*.

"I love the city of Barcelona," Ruffolo says. "Its history, culture, architecture, and spirit have fascinated me for years. The story just poured out." How Ruffolo came to write *Barcelona* is as intriguing as the journey that will bring it to the stage at TheatreZone in Naples, February 4-14, 2027.

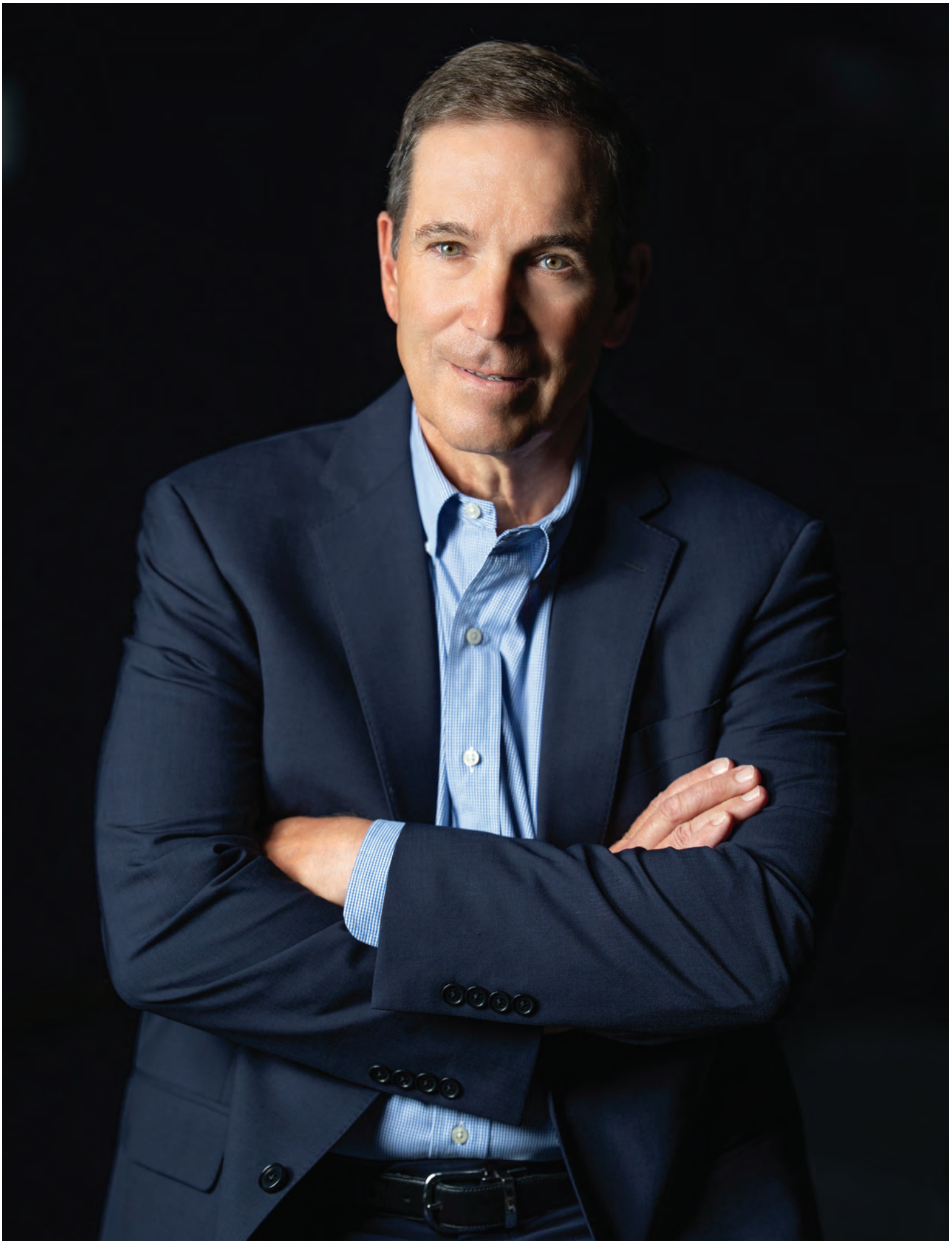
Ruffolo earned an MBA from Harvard University, was the CEO of tech companies Liquid Machines and Internap, the COO of Akamai Technologies, and earlier in his career held senior leadership positions at EMC Corporation, Xerox, and NCR Corporation. He was also the chairman of the Pelican Bay Foundation in Naples.

As someone who was looking ahead to life after a career in the corporate world, Ruffolo developed a philosophy, which he coined "Phase Two." Providing a unique look at retirement, including rethinking it, this practical model encourages people to pursue new skills and passions.

Writing a musical became a major part of Ruffolo's phase two. He first retired at 40, only to give it another shot at 50. Now in his mid-sixties, Ruffolo is an avid tennis player and devoted family man who treasures time with his grandchildren. And these days, he can add one more title to the list: playwright.

After writing the first draft of *Barcelona* on his phone, Ruffolo spent the next couple of years developing and refining iterations of the script. It was during COVID that Ruffolo, who earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Dayton, collaborated with 50 students (wearing masks) from the university to create a two-hour video production of his musical.

At this time, Ruffolo's goal was to use Queen's less popular songs for his piece, and he spent approximately 18 months negotiating with Queen's team. "They were polite and supportive," Ruffolo says. "But they were just



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being British. I don't think they were ever really interested." Ruffolo believes they didn't want to take a risk on a first-time playwright.

Though disappointed, Ruffolo was determined to find an alternative. Next, he listened to music from more than 300 artists. "What would be a good substitute for Queen?," Ruffolo wondered. His answer was American artist Jason Mraz, a Grammy-winning singer, songwriter, and guitarist known for hits like "I'm Yours" and "I Won't Give Up." Ruffolo talked with Mraz' agent and lawyers for a year, and he licensed some of his music. Yet he never connected with Mraz. At that point, Ruffolo reached out to Mark Danni, the founding artistic director for TheatreZone in Naples. "He loved the story and said he would reach out to Mraz, but he didn't get any further," Ruffolo relays.

At this point, Ruffolo fell back on his tech background; he decided to use a sophisticated AI music generator called Suno as a collaborative tool to compose the kind of music appropriate for his musical. Using Suno, he created demo tracks and continued discussing the project with Danni, who has an interest in historical fiction.

"At first, I told him 'I can't do this,'" Danni says. "That was my initial reaction. I thought that [using AI] would upset people. But then I started thinking that someone is going to do it. Why shouldn't I?" As an innovator, Danni was excited, but "as a musician, I was skeptical at first," he said. "The songs were really good and appropriate for the show, but they needed human creativity, judgment, and revision."

For the human creativity, Danni called upon Jeremy Goodman, a New York City–based composer, arranger, and orchestrator. Goodman, formerly from Naples, is a frequent collaborator with TheatreZone.



CREATED BY TIM KLING

RUFFOLO HARNESSED THE POWER OF AI TO HELP WRITE THE SCORE FOR *BARCELONA: THE MUSICAL*, A TALE OF LOVE, LOYALTY, FRIENDSHIP, AND BETRAYAL.

Working on a score generated by AI was a first for Goodman, too, who admits it has been a very exciting and different experience. "It's a great tool for people who don't have a background in music," Goodman says. "However, AI software has limitations. Musically, there are obviously things the software doesn't know: [for example,] theatrical knowledge and what is possible for a live singer. There is a lot of work on my end to fix the material and make it doable by a live person."

Goodman took Ruffolo's score and used it as a guide, massaging elements to give it more structure and melodic shape. When it comes to writing musical scores with AI, Goodman



says this: "a lot of people will use it as a tool to see what something sounds like. But it cannot replace human creativity. It doesn't have the training and theatrical understanding."

Thanks to the collaboration between Ruffolo, Danni, and Goodman, *Barcelona* is ready for its world premiere after not one, not two, but 21 versions. The musical, which features 18 original songs, is a story of friendship, love, loyalty, and betrayal. It is set in 1939 Spain within the turbulent years between the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Protagonist Antonio Garcia, a university student, is caught between loyalty to family, devotion to the woman he loves, and growing resistance to the political oppression of Francisco Franco's regime.

Barcelona is the first play and musical that Ruffolo has written, but he is working on two new works and believes that being a playwright is going to be the centerpiece of his phase two. He has high hopes that *Barcelona* will have productions beyond TheatreZone. But for now, he is eagerly looking forward to opening night.

"Partnering with Mark [Danni] is a dream," he says. "He's a visionary, and I'm a visionary." ‹‹