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Ford's Theatre Society Announces The Lincoln Legacy Commissions

BIPOC Playwright Commissioning Initiative Features Inaugural Playwrights Pearl Cleage, Rickerby Hinds, Nambi E. Kelley, Dominic Taylor and Charlayne Woodard

Washington, D.C.— Ford's Theatre today announced the launch of **The Lincoln Legacy Commissions**—a new play development initiative for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) playwrights that explores racial history and social justice in the United States and gives voice to lesser-known historical figures and their contributions to American life. Playwrights **Pearl Cleage, Rickerby Hinds, Nambi E. Kelley, Dominic Taylor and Charlayne Woodard** comprise the inaugural writers of The Lincoln Legacy Commissions.

The Commissions will serve as an artistic incubator and amplifier for underrepresented BIPOC American stories and will expand the canon of American historical drama. The Commissions process will include extensive development, encompassing first readings, developmental workshops and world-premiere productions within the next decade.

The Commissions initiative is led by Ford's Theatre Senior Artistic Advisor Sheldon Epps, Director of Artistic Programming José Carrasquillo and The Lincoln Legacy Commissions Advisor Sydne Mahone.

"We are excited to launch a new artistic initiative that supports, centers and celebrates BIPOC writers and broadens our collective understanding of American history," said **Ford's Theatre Director Paul R. Tetreault**. "We are honored to begin The Lincoln Legacy Commissions with these tremendous artists and look forward to seeing their work added to the nearly 40 world-premiere plays and musicals produced on our stage in the last 50 years."

"Throughout my career I have had a fascination with telling the stories of what I would call Unsung Heroes," said **Senior Artistic Advisor Sheldon Epps**. "Those men and women who are not well known, but who should be celebrated and placed in the spotlight for their

contributions to the growth and evolution of our country, either in big ways or small” “I believe that the writers we have chosen share this fascination, and I anticipate that many of these commissions will enlighten and entertain audiences with the stories of these lesser-known but deeply deserving of recognition icons from our nation's complicated history.”

“As a playwright and as a citizen, I want to create work that expands our idea of American history by telling the stories I know as an African-American woman living and working in Atlanta, Georgia,” said **Pearl Cleage**. “I am particularly interested in the last 50 years of our city's racial history and the ways in we who live and work and walk our dogs on former Civil War battlefields are still surrounded by the ghosts of that conflict. There is no more appropriate place to consider these questions than Ford's Theatre, where President Lincoln's blood was actually shed on April 14, 1865.”

“We are living in a time when the scab that hid the truth about American race relations has been ripped off and the resulting pain, along with the potential for healing, has been exposed,” said **Rickerby Hinds**. “To be asked to write a play that can become part of the zeitgeist of this time is truly an incredible honor for someone whose work has been addressing this issue from the moment I began writing for the stage.”

“It is so wonderful and refreshing to be engaged with a theatre that truly centers the generative artists' vision and builds the time, resources and artistry around what the artist truly needs to create,” said **Nambi E. Kelley**. “With this current now being such a pivotal moment in American history, it is also exciting to be a part of a cohort of nationally renowned artists creating work that is historical in nature [and] that is responding specifically to the now.”

“It is humbling to be part of the first Lincoln Legacy Commission playwrights,” said **Dominic Taylor**. “A significant commission that explores the history of the United States with a conscious understanding that BIPOC people are central in this engagement can be seismic. There is pressure to make a truly great play, and I am glad that I am charged with trying to accomplish that.”

“The Lincoln Legacy Commissions provide playwrights like me with the support and tools to discover extraordinary Black Americans whose stories have never been told,” said **Charlayne Woodard**. “All too often their lives and accomplishments have been ignored, buried or simply forgotten. Instead of being celebrated, history has passed them by. Our mission is to create plays that immortalize these men and women and become part of the American canon—in which people of color have long-gone woefully underrepresented.”

The Lincoln Legacy Commissions are made possible with financial support from **The Home Depot** and **KPMG LLP**.

About the Artists

Pearl Cleage is a playwright, novelist, poet and political activist. Cleage's plays and novels deal with themes of racism, sexism and feminism. Her plays, novels, poems and essays have been anthologized and are the subject of scholarly analysis. Her best-known plays, *Flying West* (1992) and *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995), have been performed in regional theatres across the United States. In 1996, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* was performed during the Atlanta Summer Olympic Games as part of the Cultural Olympiad. She is the Playwright in Residence at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre.

Rickerby Hinds is a pioneer of Hip-Hop Theater. His work has been developed at the Mark Taper Forum, Bay Area Playwrights Festival, The Royal Court Theatre in London and The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, where he presented *Blackballin'* (2008), the first hip-hop play in their history. His play *Dreamscape* (2016) became the recipient of multiple theatre accolades in the Los Angeles area. Hinds' plays have toured Romania, Poland, Austria, Hungary and Turkey. Hinds completed a Fulbright Fellowship in his native Honduras in 2016. He serves as chair of the Department of Theater, Film and Digital Production at the University of California, Riverside, and is the founding director of Riverside Studios.

Nambi E. Kelley is an actress and playwright with an extensive résumé in the United States and internationally. Most recently she appeared in the lead role of Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline* (City Theatre) and the off-Broadway production of *Kunstler* (59 E. 59). Her television credits include *Elementary*, *Person of Interest*, *Madam Secretary*, *Chicago PD* and *Chicago Justice*. Kelley is a former playwright-in-residence at the National Black Theatre and the Goodman Theatre. She is a former Dramatists Guild Fellow. Kelley is recipient of the 2020 National New Play Network annual commission, the Prince Prize (2019) and a Dramatists Guild Foundation Writers Alliance Grant (2018-19). She was chosen by Toni Morrison to adapt Morrison's *Jazz*, which premiered at Baltimore Center Stage in 2017. Kelley's adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (Sam French) premiered off-Broadway at The Duke on 42nd Street (The Acting Company; AUDELCO Award for "Best Play"). She is currently developing a Broadway-aspiring play about Dr. Maya Angelou and is a writer on Showtime's *The Chi*.

Dominic Taylor is a scholar of African-American theatre and a writer-director whose work has been seen across the country. His play *I Wish You Love* premiered at Penumbra Theatre and was produced at both The Kennedy Center and Hartford Stage in 2012. His play *Hype Hero* was developed at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Conn., and was produced at Brown University in fall 2014. The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre and New York Theatre Workshop have all commissioned Taylor's

writing. Taylor is a professor at UCLA in both the Department of African American Studies and the Department of Theatre. He is former associate artistic director of Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, MN.

Charlayne Woodard is an American playwright and actress. Woodard's two-character play, *The Garden*, commissioned by the La Jolla Playhouse, has upcoming productions in 2021 at both Baltimore Center Stage (summer) and La Jolla Playhouse (fall). Woodard's solo plays, which she has originated to great acclaim, include *Pretty Fire*, *Neat*, *In Real Life* and *The Night Watcher*. Her plays are published by Dramatists Play Service and performed at regional theatres around the country. Audio versions are available at Audible.com. As an actress, Woodard has extensive film, television and theatre credits, including playing the role of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company (2007).

Ford's Theatre Society

One of the most visited sites in the nation's capital, Ford's Theatre reopened its doors in 1968, more than a hundred years after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Operated through a partnership between Ford's Theatre Society and the National Park Service, Ford's Theatre is the premier destination in the nation's capital to explore and celebrate Abraham Lincoln's life and legacy.

Ford's Theatre Society was founded under the guidance of executive producer **Frankie Hewitt**, who, during her 35-year tenure, established Ford's as a living, working theatre producing performances that highlighted the diversity of the American experience. Since the arrival of **Paul R. Tetreault** as Director, critics and the theatregoing public have recognized Ford's for the superior quality of its artistic programming. With works from the Tony-nominated *Come From Away* and the nationally acclaimed *Big River*, to the world premieres of *Meet John Doe*, *The Heavens Are Hung In Black*, *Liberty Smith*, *Necessary Sacrifices*, *The Widow Lincoln* and *The Guard*, Ford's Theatre is making its mark on the American theatre landscape. In the past decade, the mission of Ford's Theatre Society expanded to include education as a central pillar. This expansion led to the creation and construction of the Center for Education and Leadership, which opened in February 2012. Under the current leadership of Board of Trustees Chairman **Phebe N. Novakovic** and through the lens of Lincoln's leadership and legacy, Ford's today endeavors to advance Lincoln's "unfinished work" with programs and performances that cultivate empathy, encourage dialogue and bridge divides in American life.

For more information on Ford's Theatre and the Ford's Theatre Society, please visit www.fords.org.

#LegacyPlays

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