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Ford's Theatre Presents
The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions: A First Look
and New Cohort of Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions



Readings of New Work on January 26-27, 2024:

***A Designer of Note, A Woman of Style* by Charlayne Woodard**
Directed by Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

***SISTER X* by Nambi E. Kelley**
Directed by Hana S. Sharif

***The American Five* by Chess**
Directed by Aaron Posner

Second Cohort of Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions to Include
Nilo Cruz, Chess, Gloria Reuben,
Jeanne Sakata and Madeline Sayet

[RSVP to Attend Readings](#); Tickets are Free and Open to the Public

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Ford's Theatre presents *The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions: A First Look* on January 26-27, 2024, as well as the second cohort of commissioned playwrights. The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions is designed to serve as an artistic incubator for stories about unsung heroes responsible for changing the course of civil rights and equality in American life. In its second year, this festival will include the following readings: *A Designer of Note, A Woman of Style* by **Charlayne Woodard**, about the life of fashion designer Ann Lowe; *SISTER X* by **Nambi E. Kelley**, about a young mother's quest to share her life's challenges with Malcolm X; and *The American Five* by **Chess**, which explores present-day biases and racial discord inside a graduate classroom. The second cohort of The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions is composed of **Nilo Cruz, Chess, Gloria Reuben, Jeanne Sakata and Madeline Sayet**.

"We are thrilled to present workshops and readings of these undiscovered stories in their early stages in *A First Look*. The works of these writers bring us stories of unparalleled resilience in the face of ex-

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traordinary challenges,” said **Ford’s Theatre Director Paul R. Tetreault**. “The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions first started because we asked ourselves: What are the stories yet to be uncovered? As we look to expand the scope of the commissions with our second round of playwrights, we are inspired and hopeful to continue writing this new chapter in the American theatre.”

The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions: A First Look is a free, two-day festival, providing a preview of new plays in development, with opportunities for expanded conversations around the work. This year’s festival marks a follow-through on our commitment to BIPOC artists, with readings of the remaining works of our inaugural class of commissions. We will also share the first reading from our second cohort. With *A First Look*, Ford’s gives audiences an unparalleled inside peek at the process and voices that shaped these works. Kelley and Woodard’s works complete workshops for our inaugural cohort of playwrights, which also included playwrights **Pearl Cleage, Rickerby Hinds** and **Dominic Taylor**.

Tickets for the readings are free and available to reserve now. Each reading runs approximately two hours. More information is available at www.fords.org/performance/the-fords-theatre-legacy-commissions-a-first-look-2024.

Senior Artistic Advisor **Sheldon Epps**, Director of Artistic Programming **José Carrasquillo** and The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions Advisor **Sydné Mahone** lead the initiative. Epps has shared his fascination with what he calls unsung heroes: “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.”

The Ford’s Theatre 2023-2024 season is sponsored by **Chevron** and **Lockheed Martin Corporation**. The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions are made possible by Lead Sponsor: **Boeing**.

“Boeing applauds Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions work to elevate diverse voices, ultimately enriching and strengthening our culture,” said **Ziad Ojakli**, executive vice president of government operations at **Boeing**. “We’re excited for our D.C. community to experience these talented artists’ work and spark conversation about such extraordinary people and the events they shaped.”

The line-up for the 2024 festival includes the following:

A Designer of Note, A Woman of Style

By Charlayne Woodard

Directed by Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

Dramaturgy by Sydné Mahone

Public Reading: Friday, January 26, 2024 at 7:30 p.m.

A Designer of Note, A Woman of Style by Charlayne Woodard gives us a window into the life of fashion designer Ann Lowe. Ann Lowe designed dresses for high society women and movie stars before she was commissioned to design Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy’s wedding dress. Her remarkable artistry set her apart from her male counterparts, but her achievements as a couturier and artist remained unknown for decades despite having stores on the fashion avenues of New York City. In a journey that begins in 1898 in Clayton, Alabama, Charlayne Woodard’s work traces the remarkable life and artistry of a true original American designer.

“I chose to write a play about this extraordinary woman because I must give credit where credit is due. As a creative, I know what it’s like to follow your dream, in spite of numerous obstacles, foreseen and unforeseen,” says playwright **Charlayne Woodard**. “However, the story of Ann Lowe is a tale of perseverance, creative excellence – never giving in to victimhood. A single mom for most of her life, Ms. Lowe ran over hurdle after hurdle: Racism, sexism, financial instability, health issues. After discovering this ‘hidden figure,’ and researching her life, I am empowered and inspired. I trust others will feel the same. Ann Lowe’s very unique story must no longer be ‘their little secret.’”

According to the [Washington Post](#), "What is ultimately fascinating about Lowe's designs – in addition to the story of the woman behind them – is their very Americanness. They are glamorous, to be sure, but they share a triumphant sense of pragmatism, even in their embellishments."

Delicia Turner Sonnenberg will direct **Charlayne Woodard** in a reading of her work in progress. **Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions Advisor Sydné Mahone** serves as the dramaturg. **Brandon Prendergast** is the stage manager.

Charlayne Woodard (Playwright) is an American playwright and actress. Woodard's two-character play, *The Garden*, commissioned by La Jolla Playhouse, had 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).

SISTER X

By Nambi E. Kelley

Directed by Hana S. Sharif

Dramaturgy by Sydné Mahone

Public Reading: Saturday, January 27, 2024 at 2:30 p.m.

With *SISTER X*, **Nambi E. Kelley** has given us the story of Ameilia, a young mother and a social and political activist who seeks a meeting with Malcolm X during a time of social and political upheaval. Seeking guidance and answers, Ameilia reveals the haunting truth of her life. Kelley has written Ameilia's galvanizing story in verse, thus amplifying the voices of a generation of young women whose unique stories and perspectives have seldom come to light.

"The role of women in the Nation of Islam, as both a religious and political organization, has been muted. I began to search for who these women were and what their role in the movement was," says playwright **Nambi E. Kelley**. "The information available was scarce, but early on, I hit upon the stories of young women who had been impregnated by leaders of the movement. Excavating their specific stories gave me a focus that began my quest to hear their voices."

Arena Stage Artistic Director Hana S. Sharif will direct. **Constance Swain** will portray the character of Ameilia. **Joan Foster McCarty** is the stage manager. **Kim Bey** will read stage directions.

Nambi E. Kelley (Playwright) 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 *Kunster* (59E59). 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 was the 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* (Samuel 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*.

The American Five

By Chess

Directed by Aaron Posner

Dramaturgy by José Carrasquillo

Public Reading: Saturday, January 27, 2024 at 7:30 p.m.

The American Five offers an incisive look into a single, society-shifting moment in American history while turning our perspective toward a horizon of plurality. This play's kaleidoscope structure examines the mul-

ti-generational relationship of Black and Jewish Americans. When a perspective-challenging professor invokes the “Rules of Engagement” inside the classroom, tensions rise over a discussion about anti-Semitic headlines. A viable framework for understanding present political discord and social paradigms is found in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

“What does it mean when the history that helps us achieve understanding often excludes critical moments and people? It means that historical giants such as Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison, Clarence Jones and Coretta Scott King are left out of critical retellings of the March on Washington and the ‘I Have A Dream’ speech,” says playwright **Chess**. “Through this play, I am inquiring into our collective perception of each other, our presumed alignment based on shared background and how identity manifests through us in how we speak, relate and dream. Where do we go when our plurality causes friction in a singular-driven world? How do we retain our individuality when communities are built through homogeneity? What can vulnerability and change do for us when masculinity and tradition are insufficient to remain powerful? Why do race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, ability, sex and sexuality define us? Who is allowed to undefine themselves?”

Aaron Posner will direct an ensemble that includes **Yoni Bronstein, John Floyd, Jay Frisby, Noah Keyishian** and **Fatima Quander**. **Ford’s Theatre Director of Artistic Programming José Carrasquillo** serves as the dramaturg. **Craig A. Horness** is the stage manager. **Kim Bey** will read stage directions. Learn more about Chess Jakobs and the next commissions below.

Festival Events

From Quill to Curtain: Crafting Plays Inspired by History
The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions: A First Look Playwriting Workshop
Wednesday, January 24, 2024 at 5:45 p.m. – 7:45 p.m.

Join us for a two-hour community workshop where writers of all levels are invited to work on elements of playwriting centered around building a narrative based on a historical figure or event. Themes covered will include historical research and the use of primary sources, creative license, crafting the storyline and characters and connecting the past to the present.

Playwright **Nambi E. Kelley** will share insight into her process in the creation of the play *SISTER X* in a Q-and-A-style interview at the top of the workshop. Time will be allotted to in-session writing, after which participants will share their work with the group. [Register here](#).

The New Cohort of The Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions

Ford’s Theatre is proud to announce the second cohort of the Ford’s Theatre Legacy Commissions. This cohort expands the scope of the commissions. They include diverse trailblazers in the American theatre, including a Pulitzer Prize winner, multi-hyphenate artists and noted stars of the stage and screen. Their works will receive development and support from Ford’s in the next few years. Learn more about them at www.fords.org/whats-happening/the-fords-theatre-legacy-commissions.

Nilo Cruz is a Cuban American playwright, director, lyricist, scriptwriter and teacher who weaves magical realism into stories about the immigrant experience. Cruz gained international prominence when *Anna in the Tropics* won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, for which he also received a Tony Award nomination. Works include *Dancing on Her Knees*, *A Park in Our House*, *Two Sisters and a Piano*, *A Bicycle Country* and more. They have been produced at South Coast Rep, Mark Taper Forum, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Studio, The Public and GALA Hispanic Theatre. He was mentored by Maria Irene Fornes. Affiliations: New Dramatists; past Playwright-in-Residence at McCarter, New Theatre. Teaching: Yale Drama, Brown University, University of Iowa. Training: MFA, Brown; Honorary Ph.D., Whitter College.

Chess is a Black and Jewish American storyteller and historian. He is the playwright of *The American Five*. Jakobs’ work seeks to engage storytelling as a form of historical preservation and cultural engagement. Jakobs is the Associate Director and Dramaturg of *Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors* (Off-Broadway/New World Stages, 2023) and Writer/Co-Executive Producer of *Sister Nature: Women of Color in the Environmental Movement* (under development with People over Plastic). Theatrical credits include: Steppenwolf: *Downstate*; Indiana Rep: *A Christmas Carol*; Alliance: *Colossal*; Olney: *Fiddler on the*

Roof. TV: BET, NBC, Bravo. Affiliations: Member of AEA, Associate Member of SDC and DG. Training: University of Michigan. Instagram: @chessjakobs. chessjakobs.com

Gloria Reuben is an accomplished Canadian American actress, singer and writer. She played Jeanie Boulet in *ER* (two Emmy noms., Golden Globe nom.), Elizabeth Keckley in Steven Spielberg's *Mr. Lincoln* and Krista Gordon in *Mr. Robot* (opposite Rami Malek). She appeared in *1-800-Missing*, *Raising the Bar*, *Drop Dead Diva* and NBC's *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Reuben was a backup singer for Tina Turner in 2000. Solo records include *Just For You*, and jazz albums *Perchance to Dream* (2015) and *For All We Know* (2020) under MCG Jazz. She is developing a play about the life of seamstress Elizabeth Keckley. Gloria's non-fiction book *My Brothers' Keeper: Two Brothers. Loved. And Lost.* was published by Post Hill Press in 2019.

Jeanne Sakata is an award-winning actor and playwright whose versatility spans across theater, television, film, voiceover animation and audiobooks. Center Theatre Group commissioned Sakata's first play, [*Hold These Truths*](#). It is produced nationally and internationally and is at the Library of Congress Playwrights Archive in the Asian American Pacific Islander Collection's [Jeanne Sakata Collection](#), established in 2011. She wrote *For Us All* for L.A. Theatre Works. Regional: Center Theatre Group: *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*; La Jolla: *Here There Are Blueberries* (World Premiere). Other: Lincoln Center; Kennedy Center; Vineyard; People's Light; Northlight; Theatre Works Silicon Valley; Berkeley Rep; ACT San Francisco; ACT Seattle; Portland Center Stage. Awards: L.A. Ovation Award (Outstanding Lead Actress); East West Players Trailblazer Award; Playwrights Arena Lee Melville Award.

Madeline Sayet is a Mohegan theater maker who believes the stories we pass down inform our collective possible futures. For her work as a theater maker, she has been honored as a Forbes 30Under30, TED Fellow and recipient of The White House Champion of Change Award from President Obama. As a writer, her plays include *Where We Belong*, *Up and Down the River*, *Antigone Or And Still She Must Rise Up*, *Daughters of Leda*, *The Neverland* and *The Fish*. The national tour of her play *Where We Belong*, produced by Woolly Mammoth Theater Company in association with the Folger Shakespeare Library, included such venues as: The Public Theater, The Goodman Theater (Jeff Award Nomination for Best Solo Performance), Seattle Rep (Recipient of Heilman & Haver Award for Best Play), Baltimore Center Stage, Hudson Valley Shakespeare, Philadelphia Theater Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and Portland Center Stage. She is a Clinical Assistant Professor at ASU with the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) and has served five years as the Executive Director of the Yale Indigenous Performing Arts Program, creating new programs, awards and opportunities for emerging Native Theater artists. Recent directing work includes: Bard at the Gate: Joy Harjo's *Wings of a Night Sky*; Perseverance Theater: *Tlingit Christmas Carol*, *Whale Song*; Krannert Center: *The Neverland*, *Poppea*; Connecticut Rep: *Henry IV*; South Dakota Shakespeare: *Midsummer Night's Dream*; Delaware Shakespeare: *As You Like It*; HERE Arts: *The Winter's Tale*; Glimmerglass: *The Magic Flute*.
www.madelinesayet.com

About The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions

Ford's Theatre presents a new artistic initiative for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) playwrights that will broaden the American theatre canon. Established in 2021, with first workshops in 2023, the Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions serves as an artistic incubator for stories about unsung heroes responsible for changing the course of civil rights and equality in American life. The Commissions process provides extensive development for artists, including first readings, developmental workshops and world premiere productions in the next decade. These commissions seek to broaden the American theatre canon by fostering and developing playwrights, incubating stories about social justice and racial history, and exploring the varied experiences of underrepresented characters and lesser-known historical figures and their contributions to American life.

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 theatre going public have recognized Ford's for the superior quality of its artistic programming.

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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.

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#FordsLegacyCommissions

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Ford's Education on X: [@fordsedu](https://twitter.com/fordsedu)

Website: www.fords.org

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FACT SHEET: *The Ford's Theatre Legacy*

Commissions: A First Look

New Works by Chess, Nambi E. Kelley and Charlayne Woodard

Directed by Aaron Posner, Hana S. Sharif and Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

Experience the power of The Ford's Theatre Legacy Commissions with a first look at readings of *A Designer of Note*, *A Woman of Style* by Charlayne Woodard, *SISTER X* by Nambi E. Kelley and *The American Five* by Chess.

DATES: January 26-27, 2024

LOCATION: Ford's Theatre is located at 511 10th Street NW, between E and F Streets NW.

PUBLIC READINGS:

A Designer of Note, A Woman of Style

By Charlayne Woodard

Directed by Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

Dramaturgy by Sydné Mahone

Public Reading: January 26, 2024 at 7:30 p.m.

SISTER X

By Nambi E. Kelley

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Public Reading: January 27, 2024 at 2:30 p.m.

The American Five

By Chess

Directed by Aaron Posner

Dramaturgy by José Carrasquillo

Public Reading: January 27, 2024 at 7:30 p.m.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING: Programming for pre-show and post-show panels will be announced later. *From Quill to Curtain: Crafting Plays Inspired by History*, a playwriting workshop **with Nambi E. Kelley**, will be on Wednesday, January 24, 2024 at 5:45 p.m. – 7:45 p.m. [Register here](#).

TICKETS: Free and available to the public now. [Reserve tickets here](#).

PARKING: Paid parking is available at several independent neighborhood garages: the 24-hour Quick-Park at the Grand Hyatt (entrance on 10th Street between G and H Streets NW), the Central Parking Garage (entrance on 11th Street between E and F Streets NW), and the One Parking garage below Ford's Theatre (at 511 10th Street, NW).

METRO: The Metro Center station (Red, Blue, Orange and Silver Lines) is two- and one-half blocks north of the theatre from the Eleventh Street exit. The Gallery Place-Chinatown station (Red, Yellow and Green Lines) is two- and one-half blocks north of the theatre from the G Street exit. For further information, call Metro at (202) 637-7000.

Get Free Tickets at www.fords.org – #FordsLegacyCommissions

Information: (202) 347-4833 – Toll Free: (888) 616-0270 – Groups: (202) 638-2367

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