



# FEN

BY CARYL  
CHURCHILL

DIRECTED BY  
VANESSA  
STALLING

2022 REGIONAL  
THEATRE  
TONY AWARD

court THEATRE



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
CHICAGO | Arts

## ABOUT COURT THEATRE

Court Theatre is the Tony Award-winning professional theatre of the University of Chicago, dedicated to innovation, inquiry, intellectual engagement, and community service. Court endeavors to make a lasting contribution to classic American theatre by expanding the canon of translations, adaptations, and classic texts. The theatre revives lost masterpieces; illuminates familiar texts; explores the African American theatrical canon; and discovers fresh, modern classics. Court engages and inspires its audience by providing artistically distinguished productions, audience enrichment activities, and student educational experiences. In all of this work, we are committed to recognizing, addressing, and eradicating racism, as we strive to better serve our South Side community.

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Dear Court Theatre Family,

It is our great pleasure to welcome you to Caryl Churchill's *Fen*, directed by Vanessa Stalling (*Titanic*, *Photograph 51*).

*Fen* is simultaneously a study of estrangement and a rallying cry for solidarity; it illustrates how the search for freedom can untether us from ourselves; and it asks if an act of violence can be an act of love. The complexities of the text are as treacherous as the English Fens themselves, and in this production, Stalling guides us through Churchill's world with the agility of a fenwoman on stilts.

Caryl Churchill is a uniquely talented wordsmith, crafting rich language and setting the beauty of daily life against a backdrop of oppressive systems. The stories she tells are modern classics, yet she isn't produced with the same frequency or consistency as some of her male counterparts. So we, at Court, are excited for this production of *Fen* and are excited to return to her work—and the work of other under-produced female playwrights—the way we do the works of August Wilson, Shakespeare, and Sophocles. All of these artists help us redefine what classic theatre is and can be, and all of them have a place on our stage. We began this process with our online reading of *Fen* in 2020's Theatre & Thought series, and we continue it now with the full production that you're about to experience.

We invite you to join us. Grab a pair of stilts as we follow Stalling and Churchill across the radical feminist landscape of *Fen* that is rife with pain, joy, and more than a few ghosts. We'll see you on the other side.

With gratitude,

Charles Newell  
Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director

Angel Ysaguirre  
Executive Director



FEB 10 - MAR 5, 2023

# FEN

BY CARYL CHURCHILL  
DIRECTED BY  
VANESSA STALLING

Scenic and Projection Design by Collette Pollard U.S.A.

Costume Design by Izumi Inaba U.S.A.

Lighting Design by Keith Parham U.S.A.

Sound Design by Jeffrey Levin U.S.A.

Dialect Design by Eva Breneman

Greg Geffrard and Sheryl Williams, Intimacy and Violence Directors

Derek Matson, Production Dramaturg

Casting by Becca McCracken C.S.A.

Erin Albrecht,\* Production Stage Manager

Kate Ocker,\* Asst. Stage Manager

*Fen* is sponsored by The Marion M. Lloyd Court Theatre Fund.

**Setting:** 1980s, the Fens, England. *Fen* is presented without intermission.

Please note:

This production contains the use of water-based haze.

One of the characters in this production ends their life. If you, or someone you know, is in crisis or at risk of harming themselves or others, please seek emergency medical services or call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. To speak with a trained listener, call 988. Visit 988lifeline.org for crisis chat services. 988 is confidential, free, and available 24/7/365.

*Fen* is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc., [www.concordtheatricals.com](http://www.concordtheatricals.com).

Cover photo of Genevieve VenJohnson, Elizabeth Laidlaw, and Cruz Gonzalez-Cadel by Joe Mazza.

Designers identified by U.S.A. are members of United Scenic Artists, I.A.T.S.E. Local USA829, AFL-CIO,CLC.

\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

Lizzie Bourne..... Becky / Mrs. Hassett / Alice / Ivy  
Cruz Gonzalez-Cadel\* ..... Val / Ghost  
Alex Goodrich\* ..... Frank / Wilson / Mr. Tewson / Geoffrey / Businessman  
Elizabeth Laidlaw\* ..... Nell / May / Mavis  
Morgan Lavenstein ..... Angela / Deb / Mrs. Finch / Boy  
Genevieve VenJohnson\* ..... Shirley / Shona / Miss Cade / Margaret

Understudies: Tatiana Bustamante (Val / Ghost), Sierra Coachman (Shirley / Shona / Miss Cade / Margaret / Nell / May / Mavis), Grainne Ortlieb (Angela / Deb / Mrs. Finch / Boy / Becky / Mrs. Hassett / Alice / Ivy), and Chad Patterson (Frank / Wilson / Mr. Tewson / Geoffrey / Businessman)

\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

## PRODUCTION STAFF

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Stilt Consultant ..... Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi  
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AlJoya Hall, Nik Hunder, Ann Huerta, Kenneth Martin, Nell Morrissey  
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Assistant Sound Designer ..... Stefanie Senior  
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Floor Manager ..... Kate Nagorski

Scenic Artists identified by U.S.A. are members of United Scenic Artists, I.A.T.S.E. Local USA829, AFL-CIO,CLC.

Court Theatre operates under an agreement between the League of Resident Theatres and Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States. Court Theatre is a constituent of Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American Theatre, the League of Resident Theatres, the Illinois Humanities Council, and the League of Chicago Theatres.

This project is partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events. Court Theatre acknowledges support from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.



# IN CONVERSATION: DIRECTOR VANESSA STALLING



*Associate Director of Marketing Camille Oswald interviewed Director Vanessa Stalling about her approach to Fen, and the resulting conversation was equal parts cerebral and creative, bouncing from socialism and bodily autonomy to magic and crayons.*

*Fen has been in process for quite some time. It was originally programmed as part of Court's 2020/21 season, and then there was a virtual reading of it as part of the Theatre & Thought series in 2020. Given that history, how are you feeling about staging this production now?*

I've been thinking about this play for a long time. A lot longer than I have the opportunity to do with most plays. It's allowed me to really witness the play's transformational quality. When we were first thinking about this play, it was definitely in the air that perhaps women's agency and bodily autonomy could be even more limited. Now, we find ourselves in a time where so many women don't legally have agency over their own bodies, and so the play speaks to that tension in a very different way.

The thing that the team and I have been returning to is the idea that, in a system that dehumanizes, the only way to resist that is to re-humanize. The show is very much made up of choices where the women are forced—really, everyone's forced—to make choices out of economic necessity over love. With Frank and Val in particular, this has led us to have a really strong point of view about the ending. We see it as an act of love—by Frank, for Val. The act between them is so powerful that it actually opens up this whole other portal of what we're calling “the feminine pressure cooker,” which we see at the end of the play. When it's released, it's beautiful and dark at the exact same time. You know, it's just exploding out, which can be scary!

*Throughout the play, we're made aware of this whole other world that exists just beyond where we currently are. As the play goes on, that line gets increasingly blurred, as evidenced by the magical and surreal elements employed by Churchill. What is it about these techniques that's interesting to you? What is it about Fen and Churchill's writing that pulls you to her work in the first place?*

Oh, so many things! There's a specificity to her work, but, at the exact same time, she leaves these huge gaps for artists to bring her work to whatever is the next moment in time. That allows you to craft a performance that's both super specific and also really in-depth. Like, she includes all of these moments of intense labor history, and then she also includes ghosts, girls singing, and moments of an incredible magic portal that feel very different to some of the naturalist moments that came prior to that. That challenge of grappling with such specificity, such depth, and such openness is super exciting.

*continued*

Photographs of Vanessa Stalling at the Fen first rehearsal by Joe Mazza.



**“The darker our world gets, the harder it is to find inspiration, but creative problem solving and imagination are going to be how we make the world a better place.”**



Talking about her techniques, it was helpful to think of Expressionism because of the play's episodic nature. It feels like it follows a structure of, *We're in a pretty bad situation and it just gets worse no matter what the hell we do*. It was helpful for me to think about it in that way, which led me to thinking about how that's going to manifest in the dynamic physicality of the piece. Also, the ghosts! They start to feel less magical, and more just a reality. We're created by the generations that precede us, right? This play shows how my actions right now are going to impact someone hundreds of years from now. That's at the heart of Churchill's socialism, this inherent sense of responsibility that we have for one another; through the thin layer of the ghosts and hope and possibility, we see that change is possible. There wouldn't be a point in telling a story of our responsibility for each other if there wasn't a real, strong belief that our world could be pretty different.

**How do you take these concepts that can be fairly lofty and academic—like socialism, capitalism, and bodily autonomy—and activate them for the audience?**

It's really about the environment that the characters are in and, essentially, the circumstances that they can respond to. That's the only thing that you need to make drama interesting: somebody trying to do something. That struggle is what's going to resonate with the audience, whether it's the struggle of achieving a dream, or a desire, or even just the line in the play where a child simply says, "I'd like new colors." To me, that represents dreams and agency, but also the conflict of having to admit, "You know, we can't get you new colors right now."

**You have a background as a dancer, which is a whole other means of storytelling. In a play that's so embodied, how does the movement take on new meaning to you?**

I'm curious about the work that the women are doing. When I did *Photograph 51*, it was super important that we were constantly seeing Rosalind work, like the literal activity of

the labor she was doing. She was working all the time. And the men were ... not. There's a similar activity here. You see women working the earth, on the ground, pulling out potatoes. That's then contrasted with the next scene, where we see Frank on a tractor, on a machine. He gets to be at a higher level. We're watching female bodies in this position of work that is constant and literally at a different level, so that then has to build to the question of: how are we showing the power of those women's bodies in space? Thinking about Nell, another character, walking on stilts: how can women move through space propelled by power?

**With the stilts, it's about finding creative solutions, right? Which maps back onto our earlier discussion of bodily autonomy and possibility; just because there are setbacks, doesn't mean you stop trying. It's all connected!**

Which just speaks to Churchill's brilliance! Maybe it's because her plays are able to hold such a depth of history and social circumstance that they're able to speak to so many different generations. She shows you how the struggle that was happening, at that moment in time, is relevant to our current struggles.

**Circling back to the line in the play where the young girl says, "I want different colors," what colors do you want? What do you hope for?**

It's interesting to think about dreaming during this time. The darker our world gets, the harder it is to find inspiration, but creative problem solving and imagination are going to be how we make the world a better place. I will say that I want my box of crayons to be made of these, like, beaming lights of inspiration and gratitude. I mean, to be able to work at a theatre that's excited about such artistic risks as this play, to be able to work with this incredibly talented cast, and the designers, and the creative team—I'm very thankful. I feel very much surrounded by a team of folks who are inspiring me. They are my box of crayons, and I hope I'm a good crayon for my collaborators as well. ■

# THE FENLANDS

by Derek Matson, Production Dramaturg

First things first: what is a fen? A fen is a wetland saturated by freshwater rivers that have passed through mineral soils. These waters carry with them decaying bits of vegetation—mosses, reeds, shrubs, and trees—which settle at the bottoms of their riverbeds and floodplains, creating layer upon layer of nutrient-rich peat. A fen is technically different from a bog, whose water source is rainfall; or a swamp, which is forested with woody vegetation; or a marsh, which does not necessarily accumulate peat.<sup>1</sup> Each of these environments has its own unique ecosystem.

The Fens are a region on the east coast of England, about 70 miles north of London, surrounding a bay known as the Wash and straddling the counties of Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, and Lincolnshire. The Fens encompass some 1,100 square miles of territory, and these lands lie at the convergence of several important rivers, where they pour into the sea—the Great Ouse, the Nene, the Welland, and the Witham. Taken with their tributaries, these rivers collectively drain one-eighth of England's land area.<sup>2</sup> In the not terribly flattering words of Daniel Defoe, the Fens are “the Sink of no less than thirteen counties.”<sup>3</sup>

Through the Middle Ages until the 16th century, much of the Fens consisted of “common wastes,” lands that were not earmarked for any specific purpose and which were considered to belong to everyone. Fenland inhabitants developed ingenious strategies for thriving on these communal lands and for living in tandem with the

cycles of flooding that seasonally overtook their region. They navigated their way from place to place atop stilts; they farmed reeds and sedge to make thatching for rooftops; they dug up and dried out peat for selling and burning as fuel; they caught waterfowl, fish, and eels.<sup>4</sup> Against incredible odds, they successfully cultivated a delicate balance with their natural landscape, which served them in good stead for many a century.

That all changed in 1630, when King Charles I, in need of cash, allowed himself to be persuaded that if the Crown just drained the Fens, then profits aplenty would be in the offing. Wealthy investors were champing at the bit to transform the Fens’ “wasted,” shared wetlands into “productive,” privatized farms and pastures.<sup>5</sup> With the Crown's blessing, Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden swooped in to rid the Fens of their pesky fens, and to generate entirely new plots of arable real estate out of tracts of land reclaimed from the waters of the Great Ouse and the North Sea. Fen cottagers and smallholders did their utmost to sabotage this profiteering takeover of their way of life, smashing sluices and silting up drainage ditches while they were still under construction. But in the end, the locals were no match for the early-modern rise of global capital and the burgeoning empire's hunger to commandeer natural resources. The Fens indeed were drained, the newly enclosed estates were divvied up among the venture's well-heeled backers, and the project's completion gave rise to the map of England we know today. Writing of the episode in her recent book *Fen, Bog, and Swamp*, Annie Proulx laments, “It has to be the oldest story in the world—taking ‘worthless’ lands from people deemed defective and inferior.”<sup>6</sup>

*continued*

1 William J. Mitsch and James G. Gosselink, *Wetlands* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015) 34-35.

2 Eric H. Ash, *The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017) 25.

3 Quoted in Jacquelin Burgess, “Filming the Fens: A Visual Interpretation of Regional Character,” *Valued Environments*, Eds. John R. Gold and Jacquelin Burgess (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982) 44.

4 See Ash 2-6.

5 Ash 9.

6 Annie Proulx, *Fen, Bog, and Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis* (New York: Scribner, 2022) 61.

Photo: Fenland in Cambridgeshire, England.







Depiction of the burning of haystacks during the Swing Riots of the 1830s. From *The Century Edition of Cassell's History of England*, published c. 1900.

From these already storied instances of their rebellion, people from the Fens earned a reputation for being fighters and agitators, known popularly as Fen Tigers. Their ongoing catalog of labor uprisings further bore out this notoriety. In the “Bread or Blood” Riots of 1816, which rocked the Fenland burghs of Littleport and Ely, laborers and their families, ravaged by inflation and unemployment after the Napoleonic Wars, busted into shops of millers and butchers in order to steal and redistribute food. During the Swing Riots of the 1830s, farm laborers protested starvation wages by setting fire to employers’ haystacks and mutilating their livestock in the night. These acts of resistance were especially frequent and ferocious in the Fens, where incidents of arson and animal maiming took place well into the 1840s, long after the Swing disturbances had been quelled in other regions.<sup>7</sup> Between 1906 and 1908, the early branches of the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers were established in Norfolk by labor organizer George Edwards, who rode his bicycle over 6,000 miles around the Fens enlisting new recruits to join the movement.<sup>8</sup> (You’ll hear the character of Ivy make reference to this.)

Though these glimmers of defiance might gratify the much-vaunted legend of the Fen Tiger, the region’s socioeconomic reality has long remained mired in poverty and patterns of labor exploitation. The gangmaster system of farming, whereby landowners contract a mercenary intermediary to secure and oversee gangs of workers for temporary agricultural needs, was an invention of the 19th-century Fens, where large farms needed lots of irregular work. Gangmasters came to be common all over rural England, though, in due course, they were reviled as so unscrupulous that their use fell into disrepute. For several decades in the 20th century, gangmasters disappeared from the UK labor landscape altogether, only to return with a vengeance in the early 1980s—in, of all places, the Fens.

Writing *Fen* in late 1982, Caryl Churchill had so many reasons for inviting us to consider a constellation of characters rooted in these manipulated wetlands. Margaret Thatcher was soon to be at the peak of her political powers, eagerly undertaking a massive scheme to privatize state utilities, public housing, and national industries. Growing awareness of human-caused damage to the environment was sparking heated conversation about agricultural corporatization and the defiling of public lands. The reemergence of rural labor gangs, which at that time consisted mostly of women, underscored the gendered stakes in the unevenly lucrative and increasingly globalized industry of food production. Sadly, the questions of economic inequality, climate change, and the gender pay gap are no less relevant now than they were then. *Fen* invites us to consider how its characters’ exploited circumstances are cognate to the land’s, and how they are ghosted, quite literally, by the land’s painful histories of greed. By its conclusion, the play dares us to reimagine their situations altogether, and to consider the ecstatic possibility of what it might be like, for them and for us, to reclaim emotions and desires, and to persist in progressing forward without ever, in the words of Nell late in the play, turning back for anyone. ■

7 John E. Archer, “Under Cover of Night: Arson and Animal Maiming,” *The Unquiet Countryside*, Ed. G. E. Mingay (London: Routledge, 1989) 65–79.

8 Howard Newby, *Green and Pleasant Land? Social Change in Rural England* (London: Hutchinson, 1979) 140.



# THE FEMINISM OF *FEN*

The ending of *Fen* seems to come out of nowhere. Called “an explosion of the feminine pressure cooker” by Director Vanessa Stalling, at first glance, the play’s conclusion seems to be a dramatic non-sequitur. Look a little closer, however, and you see it makes complete sense. It is the combination of feminine embodied labor, the intersection of gender and economics, motherhood, and community. It is the culmination of an intricate, incisive story; a story with its roots (excuse the pun) in Mary Chamberlain’s seminal work, *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village*.

*Fenwomen* is an oral history of the women laborers of East Anglia, the region of the Fens. The first book to be published by the feminist press Virago, this work chronicled the history of the land and the women who worked it. Speaking of its publication in 1975, Chamberlain explains, “Women’s history was starting to be a new field, so there were very few conventional sources that you could use; one of the ways that history could be found, of course, was in memories.” Connecting with the women of this community and giving them a chance to share their stories, their memories, and their lived experiences “was all part of the feminist project of reclaiming women’s lives and giving voice to those who’d been historically disenfranchised.”

The stories that emerged were striking. Severe economic hardship, limited opportunity, and hard labor existed alongside joy, love, networks of support, and tight community ties. Just as Chamberlain shares these insights in her book, Caryl Churchill echoes identical themes in *Fen*. We see how the pressures of gender shape and distort personhood. We see how the exploitation of the land mirrors the exploitation of its laborers. And we see the resulting distrust of outside forces and institutions.

In the play (as in Chamberlain’s book and as in life), these are people who are dead-set on protecting their land and their community—sometimes to a fault. As Dramaturg Derek Matson explains, “The community itself was described in so many of the women’s accounts [in *Fenwomen*] as a force that can sometimes protect them when they were in moments of desperation, sometimes even starvation. They would get help from their neighbors and, on the other hand, it’s sometimes a really repressive force, this community. It surveils them and it wants to police their behavior.”

In Churchill’s *Fen*, this is most obvious in the character of Val. Throughout the course of the production, we understand her strong ties to the community alongside her desperate need to break free of it. For Val, as for real-life fenwomen, there’s no guarantee that life outside of the Fens will be any more satisfying or lucrative. These are women who have a very specific set of skills and a very specific network, neither of which is easily transferable to a new context. As such, the pressures keeping Val in the Fens are just as real as her reasons to leave, exposing the intersecting and compounding impacts of labor, community, and opportunity.

These impacts can feel hopeless or paralyzing, without question. However, to characterize them solely as such is doing the women of this community a disservice. It erases their agency, reduces their relentless pursuit of a better life to a fruitless exercise, when this couldn’t be farther from the truth.

To quote Mary Chamberlain: “We have to remember that people do survive, people are resilient; the resourcefulness, the camaraderie, the fact that it was these women who kept these communities going. We need to remember that, and acknowledge that ... It’s women who do this, who support our society, who are the bedrock of our society. The kinds of worlds that women inhabit, create, and perpetuate—they may not be perfect, but they are perpetuating.”

When you step into the world of *Fen*, you’re stepping into one of these worlds, as imperfect and beautiful as it may be. Welcome. ■

—Camille Oswald,  
Associate Director of Marketing

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*Mary Chamberlain is a novelist, historian, and author of the international bestseller The Dressmaker’s War. Chamberlain’s first book, the highly acclaimed Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village was the first to be published by Virago Press in 1975, and was an inspiration for Caryl Churchill’s award-winning play Fen.*

Photo of  
Cruz Gonzalez-Cadel  
by Joe Mazza.



UP NEXT

## A MUSICAL CELEBRATION: THE GOSPEL AT COLONUS

You'll want to see *The Gospel at Colonus* again and again. Take it from Charlie Newell. Speaking about the first time he ever saw this production in the 1980s, Newell, Court's Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director, says: "It absolutely changed my life. I went back and saw it three times."

Court's staging of *The Gospel at Colonus* brings this astonishing production to Chicago audiences while also highlighting Chicago talent. Singer, actor, and Chicago native Mark J.P. Hood is developing, and directing, this production with Newell. Frequent Court collaborators—including Kelvin Roston Jr. and Aerial Williams—return to our stage. And the creative and design team features Associate Artistic Director Gabrielle Randle-Bent (*The Island*), John Culbert (*Arsenic and Old Lace*), and Raquel Adorno (*The Island*), among others. It's quite the lineup.

*The Gospel at Colonus* will be both a musical celebration and a living, breathing community event. It will be transcendent and moving, exuberant and inquisitive. Be a part of the experience and join us at Colonus.

*The Gospel at Colonus* will be onstage from May 12 to June 11, 2023 and tickets are on sale now. ■

Pre-production photo for the originally scheduled *The Gospel at Colonus* by Joe Mazza.





# It's Time for You to Read This

by Kamilah Rashied,  
Director of Engagement

I was riding in the car with my mother one afternoon—I could not have been more than twelve or thirteen at the time—when she asked me to open the glove compartment and take out the book inside. Without much explanation, she said, “It’s time for you to read this.” My mother was a voracious reader who made us take good care of our books, so I held it like a gift, assuming the text held some necessary information crafted just for me. It would become a ritual between us for the better part of two decades. I would come home for a visit, and she would hand me a slightly worn book and say, “It’s time for you to read this.”

My mother relied on these stories to impart the things she wanted me to know about becoming that she could not express. Eventually, without her prompt, I took on the habit of searching for meaning in the words of writers I admired myself. Now I live with the assurance that if I ever get lost, Zora Neale Hurston, or Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, or Gwendolyn Brooks will send for me, providing sustenance through their words. When people say that representation matters, this is what it means to me.

I learned, through my mother and the writers she introduced me to, how important it is to have access to stories that represent lived experiences not unlike my own. I learned, from this ritual of passing stories down, how feeling seen and understood in those narratives is integral to the process of becoming who we are. Now, I carry the spirit of that same tradition whenever I walk into a room as a leader in the arts. I will always serve from a place of understanding that my real occupation is legacy work.

In my new role as the Director of Engagement, I am most energized by envisioning how we will deepen and grow the scope of our programs, not only in schools but with our peers and partners in the community. As part of my charge, I have the privilege of advancing the work that Ron OJ Parson began at Court as our visionary and beloved Resident Artist, including the Spotlight Reading Series. I wanted to begin with reimagining this series in particular because it’s all about legacy, shining a light on unsung Black writers to honor them, and passing their work down to the next generation.

This coming spring, the Spotlight Reading Series will be celebrating the works of Sonia Sanchez, a personal hero of mine. It feels fitting to me that a pioneering woman—who was so central to the Black Arts Movement as an artist, activist, and a lifelong educator—would usher me into this next chapter of my work with Court Theatre.



*Kamilah Rashied is the Director of Engagement at Court Theatre. Rashied is an arts administrator, producer, educator, and artist with 20 years of experience in cultural production, education, and community outreach. Cultivating a broad range of programs for the public, Rashied has contributed to the development of new and ongoing programs at venerable arts and culture organizations across Chicago. ■*

**The Spotlight Reading Series** redefines—and ultimately expands—the canon of classic theatre by presenting readings of rarely produced plays by authors of color.

Originally curated by **Ron OJ Parson** as a series of readings throughout the year, this year’s Spotlight Reading Series is curated by **Kamilah Rashied** as a three-day event celebrating **Sonia Sanchez**.

- The Spotlight Reading Series will take place March 15 - 17, 2023 at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts.
- This year’s series features plays by Sonia Sanchez and highlights the perspectives of local artists, innovators, and educators.
- Tickets are free and open to the public.
- More information can be found at [CourtTheatre.org](https://CourtTheatre.org).



Right: Photo of Sonia Sanchez  
by Jack Mitchell/Getty.

Left: Photo of Kamilah Rashied  
by Zakkiyyah Najeebah.



## PROFILES



**LIZZIE BOURNE** (*Becky/Mrs. Hassett/Alice/Ivy*) is delighted to make her Court Theatre debut. Chicago credits include *Yen* (Raven Theatre); *Much Ado About Nothing* and *You Can't Take It With You* (Oak Park Festival Theatre). Select London credits include *everything that rises must dance* (Complicite); *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (White Bear); *The Glorious Damnation of Eddie Small* (Union Theatre); *Kerplunk* (Arts Theatre). Film: *The Falling*; *Ramanujan*. Radio drama: *Home Front* (BBC Radio 4). She is represented by Shirley Hamilton Talent.



**CRUZ GONZALEZ-CADEL** (*Val/Ghost*) is thrilled to return to Court Theatre. Past productions include *The Tragedy of Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* and *Electra*. Select Chicago credits include: *The Abuelas*, *La Havana Madrid* (Teatro Vista); *Measure for Measure* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci* (Goodman); *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Lookingglass); *Lela & Co.* (Steep Theatre Company; Jeff Award, Performer in a Principal Role). Film: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*; *Rounding*. Television: *Fargo*, *Chicago Med*, *The Chi*, *Empire*. She is an ensemble member and Artistic Producer at Teatro Vista. Visit [www.cruzgonzalezcadel.com](http://www.cruzgonzalezcadel.com).



**ALEX GOODRICH** (*Frank/Wilson/Mr. Tewson/Geoffrey/Businessman*) is excited to be at Court again! Previous Court credits include: *The Mousetrap*, *Photograph 51*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Assorted Chicago credits: *Hero: The Musical* (Jeff Award, Best Supporting Actor in a Musical), *Hello Dolly!*, *She Loves*

*Me*, and *Elf: The Musical* (Marriott); *It Came From Outer Space*, *Hamlet*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Chicago Shakespeare), among others. TV credits include *Chicago Fire* and *Shining Girls* on Apple TV+. He loves his wife and two kids very very very much!



**ELIZABETH LAIDLAW** (*Nell/May/Mavis*) is delighted to be back at Court Theatre. Previous Court productions include: *Life is a Dream*, *Phèdre*, *Thyestes*, and *The Adventures of Augie March*. She has performed at Steppenwolf, Chicago Shakespeare, Writers, Goodman, and others. Regional credits include Indiana Repertory Theatre,

Irish Classical Theatre Company, and American Repertory Theater. Film: *Good Guy With a Gun*, *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, and *Into the Wake*, among others. Television: *The Red Line*, *Chicago P.D.*, and *Chicago Med*. She lives in Chicago with her amazing son, Owen.

## PROFILES



**MORGAN LAVENSTEIN** (*Angela/Deb/Mrs. Finch/Boy*) is ecstatic to be making her Court Theatre debut! She is a graduate of Ithaca College and The School at Steppenwolf. Her latest plays include *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* (Strawdog); *Titus Andronicus*, *How You Kiss Me is Not How I Like to Be Kissed* (Haven Theatre); and *Red Rex* (Steep Theatre Company). Recent TV credits include *Chicago Med* and *Chicago P.D.* Morgan is a proud member of SAG and is represented by Stewart Talent Chicago.



**GENEVIEVE VENJOHNSON** (*Shirley/Shona/Miss Cade/Margaret*) returns to Court Theatre, where she appeared in: *Carmen*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *The Iphigenia Cycle*, also in its Off-Broadway run. Her most recent roles were Mame Wilkes in *Radio Golf* (Gulfshore Playhouse), and Margaret Van Helsing in *Dracula*. Chicago stage credits include Steppenwolf, Broadway In Chicago, Goodman, Chicago Children's Theatre, The House Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare, Ravinia Festival, and Lifeline Theatre. Representation: Paonessa Talent Agency. Website: [gentlebee.buzz](http://gentlebee.buzz).

**TATIANA BUSTAMANTE** (*u/s Val/Ghost*) is excited to make her Court debut! Chicago credits include *A Christmas Carol* (Drury Lane); *Gypsy* (Porchlight); *Refuge* (Theo Ubique); *National Merit* (BoHo Theatre); *Lizzie* (Firebrand). They hold a BFA from the Chicago College of Performing Arts, where they appeared in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *Sunday in the Park with George*. Tatiana is represented by Gray Talent Group. Visit [tatianabustamante.com](http://tatianabustamante.com).

**SIERRA COACHMAN** (*u/s Shirley/Shona/Miss Cade/Margaret/Nell/May/Mavis*) is delighted to be making her Court debut! She holds a BFA degree in Acting from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music with a minor in Africana Studies. Theatre credits include *Relentless* (*u/s*, performed; TimeLine and Goodman); *Marys Seacole* (*u/s*, performed; Griffin Theatre); *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (CCM); *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (Falcon). Television credits include *The Big Leap*. Sierra is represented by Gray Talent Group.

**GRAINNE ORTLIEB** (*u/s Angela/Deb/Mrs. Finch/Boy/Becky/Mrs. Hassett/Alice/Ivy*) is from the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. She received her BFA from The Theatre School at DePaul University. Upon graduating, Grainne worked for First Floor Theater in the production *Sugar in Our Wounds* (Isabel), an independent film *By The Grace of...* (Lizzie), and *Chicago Med*. During the pandemic, Grainne joined April Cleveland and fellow classmates in Santa Fe to create the Exodus Ensemble. Grainne is happy to be back to work in Chicago and at Court Theatre.



## PROFILES

**CHAD PATTERSON** (*u/s Frank/Wilson/Mr. Tewson/Geoffrey/Businessman*) is excited for the opportunity to be a part of an incredible team and theatre company. Chad is especially grateful to Jillian and Piper for their love and support. Tour: *The King's Speech*. Chicago: *Hamlet* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Red Rex* (Steep Theatre Company). Regional: *The Drowsy Chaperone* (Oregon Cabaret Theatre); *As You Like It*, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, and *Spring Awakening* (Pacific Conservatory Theatre). Commercial: Kwik Trip, WeatherTech, Kmart, Jim Beam, Insinkerator. Education: Pacific Conservatory Theatre (PCPA).

**CARYL CHURCHILL** (*Playwright*) was born on September 3, 1938 in London and was educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. *Downstairs*, her first play written while she was still at university, was first staged in 1958 and won an award at the Sunday Times National Union of Students Drama Festival. Churchill's plays include: *Owners*, *Traps*, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, *Fen*, *Serious Money*, *Ice Cream*, *Mad Forest*, *The Skriker*, *Blue Heart*, *This is a Chair*, *Far Away*, *A Number*, *Drunk Enough To Say I Love You?*, *Seven Jewish Children*, *Love & Information*, *Here We Go*, and *Escaped Alone*. Churchill has also written for radio and television.



**VANESSA STALLING** (*Director*) is the director and adaptor of the Jeff Award-winning play *United Flight 232*. She was the Associate Artistic Director of Redmoon Theater in Chicago, a Michael Maggio Fellow at Goodman Theatre, has been recognized as one of The Fifty People Who Really Perform for Chicago, and was an honored

finalist of the Women in the Arts & Media Coalition Collaboration Award. Recent productions include *The Great Leap* (Asolo Rep), *Titanic: Scenes from The British Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry, 1912* (Court Theatre), and *Roe* (Goodman). She is also the Head of Directing at UC San Diego.

**COLLETTE POLLARD** (*Scenic and Projection Designer*) returns to Court Theatre after designing *The Illusion*, *Orlando*, and *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Chicago credits include *Fannie*, *Roe*, and *The Wolves* (Goodman); *Describe the Night*, *Hir*, *The Fundamentals*, and *Between Riverside and Crazy* (Steppenwolf); *The Garbologists* (Northlight); *Big Fish* and *The Sound of Music* (Marriott); and *A Shayna Maidel* (TimeLine, where she is an artistic associate). Collette is the recipient of several Jeff Awards and is an Associate Professor of Design at the School of Theatre and Music at UIC. Many thanks to the endless support from her family.

**IZUMI INABA** (*Costume Designer*) returns to Court Theatre, having previously worked on *Harvey* and *Titanic: Scenes from The British Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry, 1912*. Recent Chicago credits: *Andy Warhol in Iran* (Northlight Theatre); *Bald Sisters* (Steppenwolf Theatre Company); *A Christmas Story: The Musical* (Marriott Theatre). Upcoming: *How To Defend Yourself* (New York Theatre

## PROFILES

Workshop); *Last Night and the Night Before* (Steppenwolf Theatre Company); *School of Rock* (Paramount Theatre). Affiliations: United Scenic Artists USA-829. Education: M.F.A. in Stage Design, Northwestern University.

**KEITH PARHAM** (*Lighting Designer*) returns to Court, having previously worked on *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*; *Oedipus Rex*; *Photograph 51*; *All My Sons*; *The Hard Problem*; *An Iliad*; *Angels in America*; *Proof* and many others. Broadway: *Thérèse Raquin* (Roundabout); *Between Riverside and Crazy* (2nd Stage Theater). Off-Broadway: *Wild Goose Dreams* (The Public); *Man from Nebraska* (2nd Stage); and *The Purple Lights of Joppa Illinois* (Atlantic Theater), among others. Awards: Obie, Lortel. Visit [keithparhamlighting.com](http://keithparhamlighting.com), [tutattheatre.org](http://tutattheatre.org).

**JEFFREY LEVIN** (*Sound Designer*) is a composer, sound designer, and musician based in Chicago. Previous Court Theatre credits include *Photograph 51*. Selected Chicago credits: *Murder on the Orient Express* (Drury Lane Theatre); *A Shayna Maidel* (TimeLine); *Grey House* (A Red Orchid Theatre); *The Brothers Size* (Steppenwolf); *Hookman* (Steep Theatre Company). Regional: *A Raisin in the Sun* (American Players Theatre), *The Great Leap* (Asolo Repertory Theatre), and *Scapino* (Gulfshore Playhouse). He is the recipient of the Edes Foundation Prize for Emerging Artists, the Michael Philippi Prize, and several Joseph Jefferson Award nominations and wins. Visit [www.jeffreylevinmusic.com](http://www.jeffreylevinmusic.com).

**EVA BRENEMAN** (*Dialect Designer*) is very excited to return to Court, where past credits include: *The Mousetrap*; *The Adventures of Augie March*; *Photograph 51*; *The Belle of Amherst*; *The Hard Problem*; *One Man, Two Guvnors* and others. Recent Chicago credits: *Murder on the Orient Express* (Drury Lane Theatre); *Private Lives* and *The Luckiest* (Raven); *The Chinese Lady* (TimeLine). Regional credits: *The Chinese Lady* (Denver Center), seven seasons at American Players Theatre, *Love's Labour's Lost* (Actors Theatre of Louisville); *Things I Know to be True* (Milwaukee Rep). Eva is an associate artist at TimeLine Theatre Company.

**SYLIVA HERNANDEZ-DISTASI** (*Stilt Consultant*) is co-founder and the current Artistic Director of The Actors Gymnasium where she also serves as master teacher, choreographer, and director of the Professional Circus Training Program. Sylvia is an Ensemble Member of the Tony Award-winning Lookingglass Theatre Company and has worked on over 15 productions with the company including: *The Baron in the Trees*, *Hard Times*, *Lookingglass Alice*, *Moby Dick*, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, et al. Other Chicago credits include Writers Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, and Goodman Theatre, among others. She has received five Joseph Jefferson Awards for her work. Other awards include the 3Arts Award for Design (2014), the Award of Honor for Outstanding Contributions by the Illinois Theatre Association (2015), and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Distinguished Achievement (2017).



## PROFILES

**GREG GEFFRARD** (*Intimacy and Violence Director*) has worked as an intimacy and violence designer throughout Chicago. Chicago credits include: *Choir Boy* (Steppenwolf, Intimacy & Fight Choreographer); *Bald Sisters* (Steppenwolf, Assistant Intimacy Choreographer); *Passage* (Remy Bumpo, Consultant); *Bat Boy*, *The Amateurs*, *Detroit '67* (Columbia College Chicago); *Gloria* (Roosevelt University). Regional: *The Color Purple* (Signature); *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Huntington Theatre); *White Noise* (Studio Theatre, Assistant Intimacy Choreographer). Teaching: Theatrical Intimacy Education, Associate Faculty; Columbia College Chicago, Visiting Professor. Other: Resident Intimacy Consultant at Steppenwolf Theatre. Next up: *The Factotum* (Lyric Opera of Chicago) and *The Comedy of Errors* (Chicago Shakespeare).

**SHERYL WILLIAMS** (*Intimacy and Violence Director*) is originally from Phoenix, Arizona. She has a BA in Musical Theater and a minor in Stage Combat from Columbia College Chicago, and has used her skills to create consent-based, story-driven choreography and sustainability in her work. In addition to working with multiple educational institutions, such as her alma mater, North Central, and Roosevelt, a few credits include: *Cabaret* (Porchlight), *Little Women* (First Folio), *Among the Dead* (Jackalope), *The Wizards* (Concrete Content), and many more. Find more information at [iamsherylwilliams.com](http://iamsherylwilliams.com).

**DEREK MATSON** (*Production Dramaturg*) is a dramaturg and translator of theater and opera. His Chicago dramaturgy credits include *Photograph 51*, *The Mousetrap*, and *Titanic: Scenes from The British Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry, 1912* (Court Theatre); *The Wheel* (Steppenwolf); *United Flight 232* (The House Theatre); and *Columbinus* (American Theater Company), among many others. Derek studied acting at the Cours Florent in Paris. His translations of French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, German, and Catalan have been featured on ARTE in France and at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Houston Grand Opera, and Wolf Trap Opera. He's a former recipient of a Fulbright Assistantship to France and a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship to Russia.

**ERIN ALBRECHT** (*Stage Manager*) has worked on 25 mainstage productions at Court, having most recently managed *The Lady from the Sea*. Touring: *Blue Man Group* (National), *The Office* (International), *The Masque of the Red Death* (Austrian). Off-Broadway: The Pearl, New York Classical, Westside, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Town Hall. Regional: Arena Stage, Arkansas Rep, American Players Theatre, and others. She holds a Bachelor of Music from the Catholic University of America and a Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Tech. Erin is a proud member of Actors' Equity Association and is an adjunct instructor of Stage Management at The Theatre School at DePaul University.

**KATE OCKER** (*Assistant Stage Manager*) is thrilled to be back at Court Theatre. Regional credits include *It Came From Outer Space*, *All's Well That Ends Well*,

## PROFILES

and *As You Like It* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *The Island*, *An Iliad*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Court Theatre); *Six Corners*, *BUDDY - The Buddy Holly Story*, and *The Spitfire Grill* (American Blues Theater); *Noises Off* (Asolo Rep); *A Christmas Carol*, *The Odd Couple*, and *An Inspector Calls* (Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma); *Red* (Resident Ensemble Players).



**CHARLES NEWELL** (*Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director*) has been Artistic Director at Court since 1994. Recent directorial highlights include *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, co-directed with Gabrielle Randle-Bent; *Oedipus Rex*; *The Adventures of Augie March*; *All My Sons*; *The Hard Problem*; and *Man in the*

*Ring*. Charlie has directed at Goodman, Guthrie, Arena Stage, Long Wharf, John Houseman's The Acting Company, Lyric Opera, Chicago Opera Theatre, Glimmerglass, and Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Awards received include the SDCF Zelda Fichandler Award, TCG Alan Schneider Award, League of Chicago Theatres' Artistic Achievement Award, four Jeff Awards, and sixteen Jeff nominations. Together with Joanie Friedman, Harry Davis, and Gabrielle Randle-Bent, Charlie is a co-founder of the Civic Actor Studio, a leadership program of the University of Chicago's Office of Civic Engagement.



**ANGEL YSAGUIRRE** (*Executive Director*) has been Court's Executive Director since 2018. Prior to this role, he served as Executive Director of Illinois Humanities. During his tenure there, the organization established a number of new programs demonstrating the contribution that the humanities can make in addressing today's most

pressing challenges. Previously, he was the Director of Global Community Investing at The Boeing Company and a program officer at the McCormick Tribune Foundation. He has served on the boards of the Theatre Communications Group, Donors Forum of Chicago, the Illinois Center for the Book, Horizons Community Services, Blair Thomas and Company, and Next Theatre.



**GABRIELLE RANDLE-BENT** (*Associate Artistic Director*) is a mother, director, dramaturg, and scholar. Her directorial highlights include *The Island* and *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (co-directed with Charles Newell) at Court Theatre; *1919* for Steppenwolf for Young Adults; and *The Year of Magical Thinking* at Remy

Bumpo. In 2019, Gabrielle was Court Theatre's inaugural Research Fellow. She is a co-founder of the Civic Actor Studio, a leadership program of the University of Chicago's Office of Civic Engagement. She has a BA in Drama from Stanford University, an MA in Performance as Public Practice from the University of Texas at Austin, and is a PhD candidate at Northwestern University, and a Senior Lecturer in the Theater and Performance Studies program at the University of Chicago.



## PROFILES



**NORA TITONE** (*Resident Dramaturg*) is the author of the 19th-century theater history *My Thoughts Be Bloody: The Bitter Rivalry of Edwin and John Wilkes Booth* (Simon & Schuster, 2010). As a dramaturg and historical researcher, Titone has collaborated with a range of artists and scholars, including playwright Anna Deavere Smith and historian

Doris Kearns Goodwin. She also contributed to projects at Arena Stage and DreamWorks Studios. Titone studied history at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, and is represented by CAA.



**BECCA McCracken** (*Casting Director*) is honored to be on staff at Court Theatre. She also freelances, most recently with Lyric Opera, The Rep, and the HBO series *Somebody Somewhere*. She worked at Simon Casting for eight years. Favorite projects include: *Million Dollar Quartet* (Apollo and Tour); *1776* (Asolo); *Rock 'n Roll*

*Christmas Tale* and *Working* (Broadway In Chicago); *The Sound of Music*, *Showboat*, and *Carousel* (Lyric); national tours of *Sister Act* and *How to Train Your Dragon*; *Divergent*; *Contagion*; *The Watchmen*; *Justice League*; *Empire*; *Chicago Fire*; *Chicago P.D.*; and *Prison Break*. Becca is committed to creating casting space that empowers the artist and focuses on inclusivity, diversity, and humanity. ■



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Names in bold are members of Court's Board of Trustees. If you would like to make a correction or remain anonymous, please contact Cara Peterson, Assistant Director of Development, at (773) 834-5293 or cpeters2@uchicago.edu. List reflects gifts received between December 1, 2021 and December 31, 2022.

# STAFF

Marilyn F. Vitale Artistic Director  
Executive Director

Charles Newell  
Angel Ysaguirre

Associate Artistic Director  
Resident Artist  
Resident Dramaturg  
Casting Director

Gabrielle Randle-Bent  
Ron OJ Parson  
Nora Titone  
Becca McCracken C.S.A.

Managing Director  
Business Clerk  
Executive Assistant

Heidi Thompson Saunders  
Luisa Acevedo  
Tyler Calhoun

Director of Engagement  
Director of Education  
Engagement Programs Manager  
Education Programs Manager  
Education Coordinator  
Teaching Artists

Kamilah Rashied  
Jarrett King  
Kelcie Beene  
Kate Wiseman  
Sade' May  
Monet Felton, Sonia Goldberg, Jamaque Newberry

Director of Production  
Associate Production Mgr./Company Mgr.  
Technical Director  
Assistant Technical Director  
Scene Shop Foreperson  
Properties Manager  
Costume Shop Manager  
Wardrobe Supervisor  
Lighting Supervisor  
Technical Director of Sound and Video

Jennifer Gadda  
Kelcie Beene  
Luke Lemanski  
Christopher Walls  
Kelly Lesniak  
Lara Musard  
Erica Friesen  
Jody Schmidt  
Travis Triplett  
Josh McCammon

Director of Development  
Senior Assistant Director of Development  
Assistant Director of Development

William Nalley  
Jean Osberger  
Cara Peterson

Director of Marketing  
Assoc. Dir. of Marketing for Content Creation  
Assoc. Dir. of Marketing for Audience Services  
Audience Development Assoc./House Mgr.  
Box Office and Ticketing Software Manager  
Assistant Box Office Managers  
Front of House Assistants

Traci Brant  
Camille Oswald  
China Whitmire  
Phillip H. Lewis  
Heather Dumdei  
Tatiana Hernandez Press, Vincent Mollica  
Jazmine Dixon, Bolu Omotoba, Jacqueline Roberts,  
Alene Taylor, Bailey Tucker

Audience Services Intern  
Public Relations  
Captions  
Audio Description  
ASL Master

Sophie Pope McCright  
Cathy Taylor Public Relations, Inc.  
CaptionPoint  
WildeMouth  
Hershella Ashford

ASL Interpreters  
Volunteer Ushers  
Volunteer Coordinator

Veramarie Baldoza N.I.C., Jen C. McElroy N.I.C.  
Courtesy of The Saints  
Rick Babcock



## NOT ALL REALISMS PHOTOGRAPHY, AFRICA, AND THE LONG 1960S

February 23—June 4, 2023

## THE METROPOL DRAMA

February 23—July 9, 2023

## CALLING ON THE PAST SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION

March 21, 2023—Winter 2024

Smart Museum of Art  
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