
URBAN STAGES

urbanStages 
PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF

DEATH OF A DRIVER

by **WILL SNIDER**
directed by **KIM T. SHARP**

starring **SARAH BASKIN & PATRICK J. SSENJOVU**

assistant director
VINCENT SCOTT

scenic design
FRANK J. OLIVA

costume design
**GAIL
COOPER-HECHT**

lighting design
JOHN SALUTZ

sound design
IAN WEHRLE

production stage manager
MIRIAM HYFLER

assistant stage manager
LINDSAY KIPNIS

original music
**ABOU LION
DIARRA**

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Actors, Production Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager appear courtesy of Actors' Equity Association.

DEATH OF A DRIVER was developed through the Wagner New Play Festival at University of California, San Diego, and Salt Lake Acting Company Playwright Lab.

CAST

Sarah.....SARAH BASKIN

Kennedy & Man.....PATRICK J. SSENJOVU

PLACE

A bar and a prison, both outside Kisumu, Kenya.

Scene 1: Bar, 2002

Scene 2: Prison, 2003

Scene 3: Bar, 2007

Scene 4: Prison, 2008

Scene 5: Bar, 2012

Scene 6: Prison, 2013

Scene 7: Bar, 2020



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NOTE FROM THE DESK OF ARTISTIC DIRECTOR FRANCES HILL

“In many Oscar bait movies, interracial friendships come with a paycheck, and follow the white characters’ journey to enlightenment.”

—*The New York Times*, January 27, 2019

The above quote is from an article by Wesley Morris. His concept of friendships or fantasies along racial lines in film struck my eye. Mr. Norris analyzed *Driving Miss Daisy* (first, a play), *The Upside* and *The Green Book’s* relationship between a black employee and a white employer, and vice versa. Will Snider’s *Death of a Driver*, Urban Stages’ 2019 spring play, addresses the same subject matter more modernly, honestly and more nuanced than any of these films could begin to muster.

In *Death of a Driver*, Mr. Snider dives into the friendship between an African taxi driver and a white American engineer in Kenya. In the play, Sarah wants to build roads to help the country’s economy, which will help the people. To build these roads, she needs a driver, someone she can trust who will help her organize workers and navigate society. Kennedy is hired. We follow them for 18 years through weddings, births of children, failed romances and political uprisings. They have a need for each other, but in the final moments of the play, we are faced with a question: what was their relationship? Was it a friendship or a fantasy? Who’s right and who’s wrong? Are we asking the right questions? I hope the play will ignite discussion.

We are happy to close our 35th production season with *Death of a Driver*. Our board of directors, artists and staff thank you for being a part of our audience this season. This season, we held a large retrospective, celebrating Urban Stages’ widely diverse history by bringing back 20 plays as performance readings. Our annual *Winter Rhythms’* festival presented 22 shows and over 100 artists in 10 days with brand new producer Tom Toce. Off our MainStage, we presented over 200 touring workshops and plays to schools, libraries and senior centers this season under the direction of Ilanna Saltzman. New touring programs include a play called *Cathay*, a true story of a freed black slave who dressed up as a man to fight in the Union Army. Also, we have a fun new workshop for teens called *Misterios de la Mascara*, a Mexican luchador mask making program. These admission-free educational programs reach thousands every year.

Stay tuned for more new plays, our 35th anniversary celebration in Central Park with Broadway star Donna Murphy, International Artist Edwina Sandys and our summer theater camp for 10 to 15-year olds. If you want to learn more about our programs, sign up for our newsletter. We all thank you for supporting us!

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WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

WILL SNIDER (*Playwright*) was born and raised in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. His play *How to Use a Knife* received a rolling world premiere through National New Play Network, won the Barrymore Award for Outstanding New Play and was a finalist for a PEN Center USA Literary Award. Other plays include *The Big Man* (Ensemble Studio Theatre's 35th Marathon of One-Act Plays) and *Strange Men*. His work has been developed at MCC Theater, NNP National Showcase of New Plays, The Kennedy Center, SPACE on Ryder Farm, Salt Lake Acting Company, *Serials @ The Flea*, the *claque* and *Makehouse*. He is an alumnus of *Youngblood* and received an EST/Sloan Grant and The Kennedy Center's Paula Vogel Playwriting Award. He earned a BA in History from Columbia with a specialization in post-colonial East African political history and spent three years working in agricultural microfinance in Kenya and Ethiopia before earning an MFA in Playwriting from UCSD. wsnider.com

KIM T. SHARP (*Director*) works regularly with Urban Stages in their efforts to champion new works by artists of diverse cultural backgrounds. He served as associate artistic director and literary manager for Abingdon Theatre Company for 16 seasons. He directed Abingdon's production of *Teddy Tonight!* written and performed by Laurence Luckinbill, which had an extended commercial run, along with six other productions. Recent directing efforts include the world premiere's of Anand Rao's *A Muslim in the Midst* at Hudson Guild Theatre and Kevin Daly's comedy *Kitty Bomb* at Theatre Row. He continues to work with theatre artists to bring challenging and invigorating material to the stage. Thanks to Frances and Will for

this opportunity as well as to the cast, the designers, stage managers and entire staff at Urban Stages for their time and talent to bring this work to the stage.

SARAH BASKIN (*Sarah*). Off-Broadway credits include *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (Roundabout Theatre Company), *Wolves* (59E59 Theaters), *I Forgive You Ronald Reagan* (Theatre Row), *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Sonnet Rep). Regionally, she has worked at Portland Center Stage, American Rep, Gulfshore Playhouse and Theatre Center in Toronto. Other favorite NY credits include an adaptation of *Jacque Rivette's L'Amour Fou* (Dangerous Ground Productions), *R&J* (Chasama), *Retrospective* (written and directed by Joan Tewkesbury). Her film/TV work includes "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," "Divorce," "Blindspot," "Who Killed Chandra Levy?," *Malaysia, The Lives of Hamilton Fish, Thanks for Sharing*. Company member of *Virago*, Subway Token Films and The Actors Center. MFA: ART/MXAT at Harvard University.

PATRICK J. SSENJOVU (*Kennedy & Man*) hails from Uganda. He started his career as a member of Alex Mukulu's Impact International, Uganda's foremost acting company. Recent works include *Red Hills* by Deborah Asimwe directed by Katie Pearl Engarde Arts; Sean Lewis's *Red Hills* directed by Katie Pearl at Quantum Theatre in Pittsburgh PA; Adong Judith's *Ga-aad* at Uganda National Theater; Ifa Bayeza's *Amistad Voices* directed by Carl Hancock-Rux at Rites and Reasons in Providence, RI. Workshops: *Strange Men* at National Play Network directed by Elio Gutierrez; Mrisho Mpoti's *Africa Kills Her Sun* at Sundance Banff/Utah directed by Indhu Rubasingham;

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WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

Lemon Andersen's *Toast* Sundance Utah directed by Elise Theron; *Death of a Driver* by Will Snider at Salt Lake Acting Company Playwrights' Lab directed by Kareem Fahmy. TV/film: "Living With Yourself" (Netflix), *Baby Won't You Please Come Home* (short), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (voice), *The Interpreter* directed by Sydney Pollock and *Game 6* directed by Michael Hoffman. He is a long-time member of Ellen Stewart's Great Jones Company at La MaMa E.T.C.

VINCENT SCOTT (*Assistant Director*) is a New York-based director who has directed in New York as well as in Los Angeles, Chicago, London and Ireland. Recently his assistant directing credits include *The Last Will* directed by Austin Pendleton, *Hellman vs McCathy* directed by Jan Buttram and *Changes of the Heart* directed by Timothy Douglas. He is also an educational consultant at Urban Stages. He is a member of SDC.

FRANK J. OLIVA (*Scenic Designer*) is a Cuban-American stage designer. With Urban Stages: *Dogs of Rwanda*, *A Deal*, *Angry Young Man* and *Communion*. Recent work includes world premieres and new productions at Cincinnati Symphony, The Contemporary American Theatre Festival, Guild Hall, Two River Theater, UP Theatre Company and others. Associate designer on projects for Broadway, Lincoln Center Theater, St. Ann's Warehouse, Atlantic Theater Company, Signature Theatre and more. Forthcoming designs include new productions of *Street Scene* (Mannes School) and *The Roommate* (Kitchen Theatre). Winner of the 2017 Innovative Theatre Award for Stage Design and a 2018 Audelco Award nominee for Best Stage Design. His work will be featured at the 2019 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design & Space. BFA: NYU. www.frankjoliva.com

GAIL COOPER-HECHT (*Costume Designer*), has designed costumes for over 300 productions for Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional theatres, national and international tours, television (PBS, HBO, Showtime, CBS and A&E). Recent designs are all female *Othello*, *In White America*, *Most Dangerous Man In America*, *Queen Esther Marrow World Tours*, *Three Mothers* (world tour), *Shanghai Gesture*, Off-Broadway *Massinessa* by Lorey Hayes for Take Wing and Soar Productions, *Savior* at Dwyer Cultural Center in Harlem, *Room Service* revival at the SoHo Playhouse, *Arrivals* (Bank St. Theater) and the Obie

Award-winning *Yiddish Pirates of Penzance*. Recently, she has designed costumes for *Simmers* directed by Brian Cox and Urban Stages' *Mabel Madness*. It has been her privilege to collaborate with many renowned actors, directors and producers. Stars who have worn her designs include Helen Hayes, Maurice Evans, Cyril Richard, Eartha Kitt, Lee Grant, Jerry Ohrbach, Melba Moore, Robert Guillaume, Sherman Helmsley, Carol Channing, Tammy Grimes, Tony Randall, Jack Klugman, Estelle Parsons, Renee Taylor, Nanette Fabray, Louis Jourdan, Robert Goulet and Geraldine Page (including the dress she wore when she received her Academy Award, which was actually her third act costume for *The Circle* in which she was currently performing). Taught costume design at Marymount Manhattan College, is a board member of The League of Professional Theatre Women and a member of United Scenic Artists Local 829. Gail Has been nominated for four AUDELCO Awards and won the Innovative Theater Award.

JOHN SALUTZ (*Lighting Designer*) is a New York-based lighting and sound designer working in theatre, dance, and live performance. His work has been seen and heard in New York at York Theatre Co., Ensemble Studio Theatre, Urban Stages, Queens Theatre in the Park, The Tank, Hard Sparks, Via Brooklyn, Two Headed Rep, Atlantic Acting School, Stella Adler Studio of Acting, as well as regionally at Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre, the Connecticut Ballet, Argyle Theatre, Southeastern Regional Ballet Association, Centenary Stage Co., Southeast Alabama Dance Co. and the Hartt School (University of Hartford). Additional information can be found at www.johnsalutzdesigns.com.

IAN WEHRLE (*Sound Designer*) is a composer and collaborator for various music direction and sound design for theatre. Recent credits include Monica Piper's *Not That Jewish* (New World Stages); *A Room of my Own* and *Hellman V. McCarthy* (Abingdon Theatre Co.); *A Dream of Red Pavilions*, *Sayonara* and *No No Boy* (Pan Asian Repertory Theatre Co.); et. al. various works (Columbia Stages and NYFA). Credits at Food Network, MTV and PBS.

MIRIAM HYFLER (*Production Stage Manager*). Favorite credits: *Three Small Irish Masterpieces*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Woman and Scarecrow* (Irish Rep), *Beautiful Day Without You* (Origin Theatre), *The*

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WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

Dingdong (The Pearl), *Author directing Author* (La MaMa E.T.C.), *How to Break* (HERE Arts Center), *The Soap Myth* (National Jewish Theater Foundation), *Henry V* (New York Classical Theatre), *Cymbeline*, *Capsule 33* (Barrow Street Theatre), *I Call My Brothers*, *The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise*, *Ludic Proxy* (The Play Company), *Strawberry and Chocolate* (International Studio Theater), several seasons with Phoenix Theatre Ensemble, Pan Asian Rep and New Century Theatre in Western Mass. Most recently stage managed *On Blueberry Hill* (Origin Theatre/Fishamble). Love to @orangefreddy.

LINDSAY KIPNIS (*Assistant Stage Manager*). *Clueless The Musical* (TNG/Dodgers); *Scissoring* (INTAR); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (SITS, SSS); *Book of Will*, *Twelfth Night*, *Love's Labour's Lost* (HVSF); *Comedy of Errors Mobile Unit*, *Under the Radar* (The Public Theater); *American Realness Festival*; *Beauty and the Beast* (BTG); *Mala Hierba* (Second Stage Theater); *La Fille du Regiment*, *Cold Mountain* (Santa Fe Opera); *Side Show* (La Jolla Playhouse). Various PSM/PM credits at NYU Tisch New Studio on Broadway; Various credits at The

Juilliard School Apprentice Program. Proud member of AEA.

ABOU LION DIARRA (*Original Music*) is the founder and musical director of the powerhouse group, The Black Warriors, NYC's premiere band working with West Africa's biggest acts. Their launch at Celebrate Brooklyn's African Festival was followed by a 40 city tour working with artists from Guinea, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Abou's native country. Abou first picked up the sticks at age three. He played on bottles, cans, tables, garbage cans, whatever made a good sound. His musical journey led him to study with one of the Ivory Coast's most renowned drummers, Soro Mades, then going on to the Institute National des Arts (INA) and a scholarship to Orchestre de L'Universite D'Abidjan. His appearances in West African clubs and on television ultimately led him to New York. Abou is a new breed of drummer who can navigate through different musical genres, switching beats, rhythms and styles. His theatre credits include *Dogs of Rwanda* (Urban Stages). Aside from playing the drums Abou also plays flute, saxophone, clarinet, guitar, bass, piano and djembe, is pursuing his song-

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WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

writing talents and hopes to achieve all that God has given him to do.

URBAN STAGES is an award-winning, not-for-profit, Off-Broadway theatre company founded in 1984 by current Artistic Director Frances Hill. For over 30 years, Urban Stages has produced dozens of world, American and NYC premieres including Pulitzer Prize Finalist *Bulrushers* (2007) by Eisa Davis. We have been honored with awards, nominations and recognition from the Drama Desk, Obie, AUDELCO, Outer Critics Circle Awards and much more. Our world premiere of the musical *Langston In Harlem* by Walter Marks (music and book) and Kent Gash (book and direction) garnered a Drama Desk nomination, a Joe A. Calloway award and four AUDELCO awards including Best Musical Production of 2010. More recently, *Mabel Madness* by Tony-winner Trezana Beverley (2016); *Angry Young Man* by Ben Woolf (2017), which transferred to the John Drew Theatre at Guild Hall in East Hampton; *A Deal* by Zhu Yi (2017); and *Dogs of Rwanda* (2018) by Sean Christopher Lewis have been critical hits. *Unseamly* by Oren Safdie (2015) was a *NY Times* Critics Pick. *Jim Brochu Character Man* (2014) was nominated for a Drama Desk and an Outer Critics Circle award for Best Solo performance and *Honky* (2013) by Greg Kalleres saw a regional run at San Diego Rep and was televised nationally on PBS in 2015. After being produced by Urban Stages, most plays move on to larger venues. *Men on the Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown* (1996) by Guillermo Reyes and *Minor Demons* (1996) by Bruce Graham both moved to commercial theatres. *Chili Queen* (1986), a play by newscaster Jim Lehrer, transferred to The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. (1989). *My Occasion of Sin* (2012) by Monica Bauer won critical acclaim when it moved to Detroit Rep. Bill Bowers has toured the United States and the world with his two Urban Stages premieres blending mime and theatre—*Beyond Words* (2012) and *Under a Montana Moon* (2002)! Some Urban Stages' premieres have even been developed into film and television projects such as *Scar* by Murray Mednick, *Conversations with the Goddesses* by Agapi Stassinopoulos and *Cotton Mary* by Alexandra Viets. In addition to plays and musicals, annually we hold a music festival, *Winter Rhythms*, featuring famous and up-and-coming cabaret, musicians, lyricists and other music artists. In 2016, *Winter Rhythms* was honored with

the Bistro Award for Outstanding Series and in 2015 it received the Ruth Kurtzman Benefit Series MAC Award from the Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs.

Information in "Who's Who in the Cast" is provided by the production. Where opinions are expressed, they are those of the players, not necessarily those of PLAYBILL Magazine.

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Michael Orbach and his staff at 259 West 30th Street.

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THE ACTORS AND STAGE MANAGERS EMPLOYED IN THIS PRODUCTION ARE MEMBERS OF ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION, THE UNION OF PROFESSIONAL ACTORS AND STAGE MANAGERS IN THE UNITED STATES.



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PUT IT IN WRITING: TONY GOLDWYN

By Olivia Clement & David Gewirtzman

Name:

Tony Goldwyn Los Angeles

Hometown:

Current Show:

Network



Zodiac Sign:

Taurus



I'm drawn to theatre that is

PROVOCATIVE

In my dressing room you'll find

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Something that grounds me is

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If I had extra hours in the day I would

SPEND MORE TIME WITH MY WIFE.

A skill I'd like to learn is

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Three words that describe me are

ENTHUSIASTIC. ABSENT-MINDED. KIND.

My autograph

Tony Goldwyn



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DREAMING IN YIDDISH

Steven Skybell gets a shot at his dream role in *Fiddler on the Roof*—just not the *Fiddler* he knew

By Ruthie Fierberg

When Steven Skybell was a young boy in Lubbock, Texas, his synagogue rented out a local movie theatre to screen *Fiddler on the Roof* (with chopped liver served in lieu of popcorn—seriously). “*Fiddler* for a Jewish boy who had an interest in the theatre was so important in ways that you even forget,” he says. Little did Skybell know that would kickstart a lifelong link to the story of Tevye.



Steven Skybell as Tevye
PHOTO BY VICTOR NECHAY / PROPERPIX

“My whole adult life I had been looking for opportunities to take on Tevye,” Skybell confesses. Tevye has been an unshakable force, “something that’s just rumbled around in me for what feels like my entire life.”

So when National Yiddish Theatre of Folksbiene announced its Yiddish-language production of the classic, directed by Joel Grey—currently at Off-Broadway’s Stage 42—Skybell “jokingly said to myself, ‘Just my luck. I’m playing Tevye in Yiddish.’” As it turns out, Yiddish has been the driving force behind “the most amazing experience” and distinguishes this *Fiddler on the Roof* as a seminal production—imbued with more meaning, context, and authenticity than ever before.

Though Skybell originally bemoaned that his true stab at the role wouldn’t be in Broadway’s English, the authentic Yiddish text has been a road map to the character.

“The thing about Yiddish is that it’s earthy ... but it also reaches up to G-d. I love how it’s posed between those two flames,” says Skybell. “What is so beautiful about getting to be Tevye in Yiddish is, because he is just a dairyman and can barely make ends

meet and he also talks to God, flipping between those two things seems so beautifully facilitated by Yiddish.”

His freedom with the language allows spontaneity and realism in his performance. When Skybell speaks, you feel as though you understand every word, even if you don’t speak Yiddish—the way in which the most expert of Shakespearean

players deliver iambic pentameter as if it were as sensible as modern English.

That naturalism also speaks to Skybell’s lifelong mulling over the role. “In the way you would approach Hamlet, which is to say you can be thinking about Hamlet your entire life, and then you finally get to play him and all that cognition, all those previous explorations are only going to deepen your interpretation,” he says.

Skybell discovers new layers each night and cumulatively as the production continues its run. “Tevye has that endless well of expression,” the actor marvels. “I don’t think one could ever get tired of the journey he goes on in this play.” Seems like it was worth the wait.

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ON THE CARPET: OH THAT'S THE SOUND OF LOVE

Photos by Joseph Marzullo/WENN



CHOIR BOY CELEBRATES OPENING NIGHT

1. The cast. 2. Director Trip Cullman, playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, and star Jeremy Pope. 3. Among those on the red carpet were: a. Jussie Smollett (*Fox's Empire*); b. Tony winner Phylicia Rashad (*A Raisin in the Sun*); c. Jelani Alladin (*Frozen's Kristoff*); d. Debra Messing (*Will & Grace, Outside Mullingar*); e. The Cooper siblings: Alex, Lilli (*SpongeBob SquarePants*), and Eddie (*Little Shop of Horrors*) came out in support of their father Tony winner Chuck Cooper (*The Life*) as Headmaster Morrow; and f. Tony winner Patina Miller (*Pippin*) and husband David Mars.



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OFF-BROADWAY VOICES: DOWNTOWN DYNAMOS

By Olivia Clement

Niegel Smith, The Flea Theater

The Flea may have just undergone a major renovation and acquired a new three-theatre complex in Tribeca, but its identity is still firmly rooted in its decades-old mission statement: To raise a joyful hell in a small space.




“We’re a downtown theatre, which means we can be aesthetically ambitious and push form,” says artistic director Niegel Smith, who took the helm in 2015. “The project is to support art for art’s sake. It’s about a community of people revealing rough truths and showing us ecstatic delights.”

Community is at the heart of The Flea Theater, which is home to a vibrant and large collective of resident actors known as The Bats; resident directors; and playwrights (members of the theatre’s SERIALS writers’ room). “It’s so inspiring to work here,” says Smith. “We are that unique place in the ecology of New York theatre that is a hotbed of young talent.”


Such an environment ensures that the concerns and energy of young artists are at the forefront of the theatre’s programming. The Flea’s current season, aptly named the Color Brave season (landed upon by producing director Carol Ostrow), is rich with works that explore race, racism, colorism, intersectional feminism, and gun violence.

“I’m attracted to plays and performances that have an urgent social question that they’re wrestling with,” says Smith. Under his leadership, the season showcases early-career artists like Geraldine Inoa and Kristiana Rae Colón, playwrights who are fiercely questioning the status quo and imagining different landscapes through their storytelling.

Alongside its support of emerging talent, The Flea remains dedicated to its more established artists too; theatremakers such as Thomas Bradshaw, Adam Rapp, and Liz Swados have returned to the Off-Off-Broadway theatre time and time again. This month, Smith directs Bradshaw’s 2008 play *Southern Promises*, an examination of the disturbing and corrupting power of American slavery.

Perhaps owing to his background in educational theatre, Smith is driven by a “deep desire to really impact the next generation of theatregoers.” As The Flea continues to expand, both in its programming and company of resident artists, the artistic director is dedicated to upholding the theatre’s mission of joyful artistry, while continuing to further wrestle with the important cultural conversations of our time, however uncomfortable. His theatre, after all, is called The Flea. “We’ll get underneath your skin,” says Smith. 

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Judy Samelson
PHOTO BY MARC J. FRANKLIN

THEATRE, SHE WROTE

Playbill's Judy Samelson steps down after 40 years

By Mark Peikert

By the time Judy Samelson retires this month, she will have been part of the Playbill family for 40 years and multiple jobs, including as the magazine's second editor-in-chief.

"Initially I was answering phones," she says. "We worked in a bullpen down on Sixth Avenue and Broome Street, and I was at the front desk answering phones and trafficking ads and film and progressive proofs."

Samelson went on to keep one foot in production and one foot in editorial, a feat of balance that stood her in good stead when she took over the editorial helm in 1994 (she eventually moved on to production manager, overseeing Playbills for theatres around the country). "Because I worked with both production and editorial, I was given an opportunity here [that] I never would have at any other publication," she says. "I was completely green when I started. As editor, I was just picking up [outgoing editor-in-chief] Joan Alleman's mantle, [but] I had a really good sense of everything that happened in all areas of the publication because I also worked with the sales staff."

As editor-in-chief, Samelson oversaw major changes to the Playbills, including

many that are still in existence. "When I took over, we didn't have an art director so I was taking photos and laying out editorial and trying to satisfy a lot of people with not a lot of space in the book," she says. "At one point we started running pieces shorter to give more play to more productions."

As technology advanced, Samelson adds, "We got thrown into the pool and swam." Digital became a focus both in terms of editorial coverage and production, and what was once a lengthy printing process became increasingly streamlined and efficient.

What hasn't changed is the appeal of theatre, even as the world itself has more to offer. Samelson points to Broadway's continued popularity and the regular crop of "cult favorite" shows despite the abundance of other entertainment options.

Retirement won't affect her theatregoing habits, but she will miss Playbill. "It sounds corny, but I'm going to miss working with these people," she says. "It's such a good group. It's run like a well-oiled machine because of all the people here who are so easy to work with. And we're all working with the same goal: to make everything as good as it can possibly be. That's what I'll miss." ♦

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Phoebe Waller-Bridge
PHOTO BY JASON HETHERINGTON

BAG LADY

Phoebe Waller-Bridge brings acclaimed solo show *Fleabag* to Off-Broadway

By Mark Peikert

Before she was the star of her own Amazon Prime series and before she gave audiences two of the most memorable characters in recent years as the writer of *Killing Eve*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge took the London theatre world by storm in her solo show *Fleabag*.

An immediate sensation at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, *Fleabag* follows one woman in the aftermath of a tragedy as she struggles to come to terms with her new reality. The show is also very much a comedy, in keeping with what has quickly become Waller-Bridge's calling card: Dark, scabrous humor highlighting the inanity of tragedy and the ways in which one can watch oneself making terrible choices while powerless to stop.

Now, fans of the Amazon Prime adaptation—which just finished filming its second season, complete with guest stars Kristin Scott Thomas and Fiona Shaw—have an opportunity to see Waller-Bridge perform the show live at Manhattan's Soho Playhouse, where it will run through April 14.

Though she hasn't performed the original stage version in some time, Waller-Bridge is more excited than nervous to team up again with director Vicky Jones and return

to *Fleabag*'s shoes—particularly since, while the character has matured and evolved over two seasons of a television show, the stage version has remained unchanged.

"I'd always wanted to bring it to New York," Waller-Bridge says over the phone, shortly after wrapping the second season. "It had been a pipe dream for so long that I'm fulfilling a dream rather than adding something on to the end."

And though time has passed since she first wrote the show, Waller-Bridge calls herself a "purist" in terms of not changing the script. "There's a British geography joke that will not land, so I might tweak there but other than that, no. I've got to stay true to it." Though she admits with a laugh that she may also adjust a line in which *Fleabag* describes herself as 26 years old. "It's a really small space," she says dryly, a perfect example of the singular sensibility that makes her a natural fit for New York.

The feeling is mutual. "I feel a deep affinity for New Yorkers," she says. "And that's probably irrational, but I feel like New York is kind of like that cousin you see three times a year. There are the strange relatives you dread seeing, but there's that one naughty cousin you can't wait to see. That's New York!" ♦

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TUNE IN

Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks pushes past the cacophony to the ugliness within in *White Noise*

By Ruthie Fierberg

Suzan-Lori Parks' idea for her latest play hit her while watching, well, a Suzan-Lori Parks play. "There's a moment in *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Part 2* [her play about slavery] where Hero and Smith are standing together and wondering what it would be like in the future. Should Hero be walking down the road a free man, he wonders if the white lawmen will just be OK with him being on his own if he's not owned by someone," she recalls. "As I watched that part of the play night after night after night, I could hear the new play happening."

Flash forward 150 years from Hero's question to the present day answer in Parks' *White Noise*, premiering Off-Broadway at The Public Theater March 5 through April 14, where four best friends from college confront "the deep realities of our world" after one of them gets hassled by the cops.

The educated, progressive, "woke" former bandmates (played by Sheria Irving, Tony nominee Thomas Sadoski, Zoë Winters, and Tony winner Daveed Diggs) must reconcile racism, friendship, and what Parks calls the disintegration of the social contract of humanity. "In this play, the white guy isn't the bad guy and the black guy the good guy—that's so f*cking boring," she says. "Everybody's culpable. Everybody's complicit."

And don't let the potential archetypes fool you, either. Parks hones in on specifics in each of their humanity. "I am the white woman character, black woman character. I am the black man character, the white man character," she says. "I have to stand in that person's shoes." Parks requires Olympic-level introspection from her actors, as well; it's why she enlisted Public Artistic Director Oskar Eustis as the director. "I love how he's

getting them to really dig in, go past your comfort zone," she says.


The Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright pushes us to reconcile the dark ideologies roiling within ourselves—even in the most liberal minds. Parks, as is her nature, unearths the unspoken. "It's not saying

Suzan-Lori-Parks
PHOTO BY TAMMY SHELL



[unspoken beliefs], it's thinking them and feeling them. Those *thoughts* are more of the thing that needs to be uncovered and examined," she says. "There are wounds that are festering that we are not attending to. We have to work through our sh*t."

But Parks is not here to do it for you. "It's like a fairy tale," she says. "[Fairy tales] give you a context in which to talk about some things that you're experiencing in your day-to-day. Theatre works in the same way—if it's good theatre. When it's well-crafted, well-honed, it opens wounds for the purpose of encouraging conversation while also giving us the tools with which to have that conversation."

Parks harbors a lot of questions for herself and her audiences, and she probes deep. "I ask big, 'cause I'm Suzan-Lori Parks," she says. "This is what I do." 

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