

# CULTURAL DIVERSITY

## ESSAY



A theater has one distinct advantage over other cultural institutions, such as libraries or museums: it is flexible and fluid and can change or alter its priorities swiftly to respond to the challenges of society. Arena's sensitivity to the challenges of society has always been one of its strongest characteristics from its very inception, when it was Washington's first integrated theater. In 1968, Zelda addressed the following challenge: "The creative casting of black and white actors in a repertory selected with that end in mind [speaking to black concerns] should make it possible for us to explode the theater event to a dimension that we have rarely experienced and connect the work on stage with the reality outside." After its success with *The Great White Hope*, Arena would experiment with its integrated ensemble in the 1968-69 season. Following the incomplete success of that venture, the theater would actively wrestle for two decades with the question of multicultural representation on its stages, opening its home to such artists as Samm-Art Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, Raul Julia, Ruby Dee, Avery Brooks, and Morgan Freeman, among many others.

Twenty years after the above remarks, the challenge was still great, if not greater. In what was fittingly called a challenge grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts, Zelda wrote: "Located in the nation's capital, with a population 64% black, 6% Hispanic, and 3% Asian and others, Arena Stage has become increasingly aware of its failure and, indeed, the general failure of American non-profit theaters in urban centers to have sufficient multicultural representation on its stages, in its audience, among its personnel." This time the question would be answered in a manner befitting its importance: On December 12, 1989, the NEA awarded Arena a \$1 million grant, the largest in the company's forty years, for the development of multicultural representation in its acting ensemble, production team, and staff.

The grant, awarded over a four-year period in which its funds must be matched three-to-one by outside sources, enables Arena to expand its cultural diversity program on several fronts. A cornerstone of the grant is the Fellows Program, which recruits up to ten

culturally diverse candidates from around the country annually and trains them under a mentoring program in all aspects of Arena's life, from directing to management, in order to develop a pool of capable young professionals who can go on to culturally specific theaters like the Negro Ensemble Company or Intar or mainstream institutions like the Guthrie, or move up to available positions at Arena itself. Said Zelda: "We will break the cycle of exclusion and disengagement among our young people that keeps them from considering the theater as a realistic career option." In a felicitous move, the training program was named the Allen Lee Hughes Fellows Program, after Arena's talented associate artist/lighting designer, who came to Arena in 1969 as an intern and has created some of the most exciting lighting designs seen at Arena and around the country.

The grant also goes towards enlarging the acting company to include ethnically diverse actors and to train the expanded company so that the new ensemble may work from a common artistic vocabulary. The new play-commissioning program is being expanded to offer more opportunities for culturally diverse writers. Indeed, one of the productions in the 1990-91 repertory of new plays, *Before It Hits Home*, about AIDS in the black community, is written by Cheryl West, the first resident author under the grant's auspices. In general, the grant helps explore the possibilities for the "explosion" Zelda mentioned in 1969: to cast plays multiculturally, to create new works that offer the potential for any and all actors to work together, to reflect the cultural needs and realities of our world on our stage.

Perhaps the most significant addition under the grant is the appointment of Tazewell Thompson as an artistic associate. Thompson, who had been trained as an actor, first came to Arena to direct the special production of the musical *Abyssinia*. He went on to direct *Playboy of the West Indies* in the 1989-90 season and was then chosen by Zelda to become an artistic associate. The following season, he directed an all-black *The Glass Menagerie* and August Wilson's *Fences*, two highly successful productions that were instrumental in broadening the community base of Arena's audience. Thompson is part of the theater's artistic leadership, involved in choosing the season, casting the acting company, and developing new writing talents.

Thompson also directed the opening play of the fortieth anniversary season, Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. On August 14, two days before Arena's fortieth birthday, the cast assembled for the first rehearsal. The previous week, the newspapers were full of the story of Actors' Equity's objection to the casting of a white actor, Jonathan Pryce, in the role of a Eurasian in the musical *Miss Saigon*. As the controversy raged, the editorial pages were dealing for the first time with the phrases "multicultural" and "non-traditional casting," trying to understand their complexity. Meanwhile, in the Old Vat Room, a cast of twenty-seven actors, composed of a vast variety of races, under the guidance of an African American director and an ethnically diverse design team, embarked on Brecht's journey of belonging and ownership.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* has been performed three times at Arena, each time at a significant crossroad in the institution's development. Given the present stakes in our society, this crossroad could hardly be more significant. It is encouraging and moving to have arrived at it with the present company; Grusha's journey—and the company's—promises to be even more astonishing than it was thirty years before.

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Producing Director Zelda Fichandler and Artistic Associate Tazewell Thompson look on as Associate Artist Allen Lee Hughes welcomes Fellows candidates to the First Annual Fellows Weekend June 8, 1990.

## THE 1990-91 SEASON

### Closer Than Ever

Lyrics by Richard Maltby, Jr.  
Music by David Shire  
Directed by Richard Maltby, Jr. (K/SP)

### The Caucasian Chalk Circle

by Bertolt Brecht  
Translated by Ralph Manheim  
Directed by Tazewell Thompson (A)

### Cerceau

by Viktor Slavkin  
Translated by Fritz Brun and  
Laurence Maslon  
Directed by Liviu Ciulei (K)

**Our Town** by Thornton Wilder  
Directed by Douglas C. Wager (A)

### From the Mississippi Delta

by Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland  
Directed by Jonathan Wilson (K/SP)

### A Repertory of New Drama:

#### Before It Hits Home

by Cheryl West  
Directed by Tazewell Thompson (A)

#### Born Guilty

Stage adaptation by Ari Roth  
From the book by Peter Sichrovsky  
Directed by Zelda Fichandler

**Pygmalion** by George Bernard Shaw  
Directed by Douglas C. Wager (K)

### My Children! My Africa!

by Athol Fugard  
Directed by Max Mayer (OVR)

### She Stoops to Conquer

by Oliver Goldsmith  
Directed by Joe Dowling (A)

### Stage Four:

#### Vivisections from the Blown Mind

by Alonzo D. Lamont, Jr.  
Directed by Clinton Turner Davis (OVR)

### Two Gentlemen of Verona

by William Shakespeare  
Directed by Charles Newell  
Performed by The Acting Company (K)

### The Seagull

by Anton Chekhov  
Translated by Jean-Claude van Itallie  
Directed by Douglas C. Wager (A)

### On the Way Home (OVR/SP)

## SPOTLIGHTS

### Born Guilty

When Austrian journalist Peter Sichrovsky's interviews with children of Nazi families appeared in Europe in 1987, they caused an immediate sensation. Arena optioned the book, *Born Guilty*, and, under Zelda's direction, commissioned a dramatic version from Ari Roth. After a workshop in June of 1990, the promise of the material—especially seen in light of German reunification—led to the play being chosen as one of the two new plays to be presented in repertory.

### The Caucasian Chalk Circle

Almost thirty years after Arena opened its new building with Brecht's parable of belonging and ownership, the season opened with a new, multi-cultural production directed by Tazewell Thompson. Featuring a costume design by Paul Tazewell that used elements of medieval, Asian, and African cultures, this epic tale was headed by Gail Grate as Grusha and Lewis J. Stadlen as the anarchic judge, Azdak. Hap Erstein of the *Washington Times* said, "This *Chalk Circle* demonstrates why Arena Stage is one of the premier production companies in the nation."



## THE 1990-91 SEASON



Celebrating its fourth decade, Arena offers several tributes to its past in its season selection. *Cerceau* marks Arena's eighth American premiere of an Eastern European work. Robert Prosky returns as the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, and Joe Dowling stages *She Stoops to Conquer*, which opened the theater in 1950.

Living Stage and Robert Alexander fulfill a dream with the opening of the Living Stage Theatre School, providing professional training in the philosophy and techniques of Living Stage and preparing actors for work with the company.

At a black-tie gala on October 22, over seven hundred people pay tribute to Arena and to Zelda. A multimedia show features a history of the theater and performances of scenes from several memorable Arena productions.

Zelda and the Board announce that Stephen Richard will become Arena's new executive director on February 1, 1991. Richard comments, "Arena is about to discover what's next. I think that's going to be extremely interesting."

David Lloyd Kreeger, whose invaluable support of Arena Stage was most visibly manifest in the Kreeger Theater, passes away on November 18, 1990.

# ARENA AT A GLANCE



Zelda once compared the life of the theater to a river—a powerful and continuously running life force, the strength of which is composed of the many artists, administrators, and craftspeople who are its tributaries. From the maintenance staff that begins work at 8:00 a.m. to the members of the administrative and production staffs who regularly work until well after midnight, Arena Stage employs over five hundred different people throughout the season. Each employee contributes to navigating the theater's surging flow of activity.

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The overall fiscal responsibility for Arena Stage rests with the Board of Trustees which is currently comprised of approximately thirty-five volunteer members from the community. At this time it is led by Chairman Richard W. Snowdon and President Denie S. Weil, both elected to these positions in the fall of 1990. Mr. Snowdon will hold this temporary nine-month position while the leadership of the theater is in transition. The Board approves each season's budget as well as any major financial decision, raises funds to support the theater's work, and hires the artistic and executive leadership of the theater. In addition, its members act as spokespersons for the theater in the community.

## ARTISTIC

Producing Director Zelda Fichandler is responsible for the final selection process of plays, actors, designers and directors for the season. She directs at least one show per season and has final approval on all artistic, production, and promotional aspects of each show. Zelda leads the institution in planning the larger undertakings of the theater in terms of the building, new projects, funding endeavors, foreign tours, and the balance between artistic and economic considerations. With the 1991-92 season and Zelda's move to New York to assume the artistic directorship of The Acting Company, the position of producing director will be dissolved and her duties will be assumed by other members of the artistic and management leadership.

Colleagues of the producing director include Associate Producing Director Douglas C. Wager who provides key support and guidance with regard to repertory, the company, and selecting artistic personnel. Wager, with Arena since 1973 and director of almost thirty productions, was recently appointed artistic director, a position he will assume in the 1991-92 season. Artistic Associate Tazewell Thompson joined the staff in 1989 and participates in season planning, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of culturally diverse plays and artists. He also directs several projects for the theater per season. Associate Producer Guy Bergquist coordinates all scheduling and planning for each production at the theater. He prepares and monitors all production budgets and oversees all production and technical aspects of the season. Administratively, he supervises all theater operations including finance, front of house, personnel and facilities. Literary Manager/Dramaturg Laurence Maslon, in his third season, reads and evaluates new plays for possible production and facilitates the selection of commissioned playwrights. He also assists in choosing translations of plays from other languages and provides dramaturgical research and evaluation on all productions. Along with the rest of the artistic team, he takes part in planning the season. In charge of supervising the casting of all plays in the season is three-year producing associate, Benita Hofstetter, who arranges and attends all New York and local auditions for principals and understudies, approximately two thousand actors per year; she also is in charge of the Internship Program.



Top: Douglas C. Wager and playwright Heather McDonald collaborate during a rehearsal of the 1987-88 Stage Four production of *The Rivers and Ravines*.

Bottom: Tazewell Thompson and actor Yaphet Kotto discuss a moment during rehearsals for the acclaimed production of August Wilson's *Fences*.

Facing page, top: A member of the production crew navigates a complex piece of flying scenery in preparation for Douglas C. Wager's 1983 production of *Candide*.

Facing page, middle: Properties Master Chuck Fox works on the boat seen in Zelda's 1983 production of *The Three Sisters*.

Facing page, bottom: In her twenty-five-year tenure at Arena, Costumiere Marjorie Slaiman has designed thousands of costumes for over 125 productions. From left to right, Marjorie Slaiman, Crystal Walker, John Van Hout, and Margaret E. Weedon.

One of Arena's primary defining artistic characteristics is a resident ensemble of individual talents who become a unified and expressive creative instrument. The acting company is the focus of the combined artistic efforts for, as Zelda has reminded us, "the actor stands at the center of the theatrical experience." The work of the acting company, the conduit for the theatrical life force, is further outlined in a special essay.

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## PRODUCTION

Each play in the season has a first-rehearsal meeting attended by all staff, a session at which the director and designers present the concept of the show and share design sketches and models with the assembled group. Often the producing director speaks, as well as the playwright and dramaturg. Every show rehearses for five or six weeks, the last week of which is a "tech week" when all technical and visual ingredients of a production are introduced and unified. Sometimes, as in the case of a musical or a play directed by certain guest directors, this period is extended to two weeks.

The production manager, Martha Knight, has worked throughout five different seasons at Arena. She and her staff coordinate all production aspects of each play: hiring crew, arranging housing and travel for all visiting artists, and allocating space for the vast number of rehearsals, performances, and special events.

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## TECHNICAL

On any given day the shop employees work on aspects of scenery for all three theaters. They translate the designers' interpretations of the playwrights' words into practical realities, from skyscrapers that rise out of the floor, to the installation of a swimming pool, to carving glaciers. Their craftsmanship is carried out under the talented supervisory eye of Technical Director David M. Glenn, a twelve-year veteran of Arena, who oversees and is responsible for the coordination and execution of all technical aspects of productions. He is ably assisted by Associate Technical Director James Glendinning, a thirteen season vet, who manages Arena's scene shop.

Properties Master Chuck Fox, a ten-year veteran, and a full-time staff of five secure all furniture, set dressing, hand and personal properties for all productions. From elegant upholstery to masterful sculpture, Arena's stages are always well dressed with custom-designed precision props. Their attention to detail is highlighted by the work of Master Electrician Christopher Townsend, a seven-year veteran, and his staff who carry out the concepts of the lighting designer as well as design and construct special effects. Further environmental enrichment is provided by Susan R. White, the master sound technician and a nine-year Arena veteran, who designs and supervises the construction of all sound tracks and sound reinforcement or enhancement used in productions, from period music to atmospheric effects. In conjunction with the production manager, these individuals and their staffs transform directors' and designers' concepts into the world of the stage.

At the conclusion of the 1989-90 season Marjorie Slaiman celebrated twenty-five years as costumiere. During her tenure at Arena she has designed thousands of costumes for 120 productions. She and her assistants build and maintain costumes for all productions. In addition to supervising the department, Ms. Slaiman designs more than half of the productions each season. Among the luminaries she has adorned are Jane Alexander, James Earl Jones, Kevin Kline and Dianne Wiest, to name but a few. Also working out of this department is a



# ARENA AT A GLANCE



full-time wigmaster. Other designers, though not in residence, are affiliated with the theater over the course of the season and design several shows. These designers, called "associate artists," include lighting designers Allen Lee Hughes, Nancy Schertler, and set designer Douglas Stein.

## STAGE MANAGEMENT

Stage managers at Arena are drawn back season after season by the enormous variety of work available under one roof and the quality of excellence in resident as well as guest artists. Each stage manager is responsible for coordinating, recording, and scheduling all aspects of the development of a play from first rehearsal to running and maintaining the show during the performance period. Arena has six resident stage managers—valuable artistic collaborators who maintain the directors' work throughout the run of a show.

## LITERARY

Arena's literary office has a full-time literary manager/dramaturg and associate who provide dramaturgical research for all productions. The literary staff and part-time assistants read close to one thousand scripts per year. They also write study guides and articles for the theater's publications, moderate over thirty post-show discussions per season, and administer grant programs such as the NEH Public Humanities Project grants.

## ADMINISTRATION

Overall responsibility for the financial health of the theater is the purview of the executive director, Stephen Richard, who works closely with the Board of Trustees to energize, inspire, and guide the efforts of its members, and to assist the Board in reviewing Arena's governance structures. With the Board, he helps to ensure long-range support for the theater's artistic goals in terms of program, funds, and facilities. He also oversees all marketing activities of the theater. This individual is a crucial conduit between the Board and the staff and acts as a spokesperson in the local and national communities to articulate Arena's mission.

Administrative Director JoAnn M. Overholt joined the Arena staff twenty-six years ago under the Ford Foundation's Administrative Intern Program. She and her assistant prepare budgets and track fringe benefits programs, maintain personnel records, prepare the weekly payroll (which accounts for 60% of Arena's budget), and purchase office equipment. All of these responsibilities affect the budget, which the administrative director monitors in close cooperation with the business office.

## BUSINESS OFFICE

For twenty-two seasons, Business Manager Richard Schaefer has supervised the disbursement of all incoming and outgoing funds. He and his staff handle all revenue, prepare payroll, and pay the fees to visiting artists. They are responsible for all financial accounting.

## DEVELOPMENT

Development, the raising of unearned income, has become a major part of Arena's administrative endeavors. From Arena's inception until 1980, Zelda and Tom Fichandler handled development duties in addition to all their other responsibilities. With the growing economic

needs of the theater, Elspeth Udvarhelyi, now a ten-year veteran, was appointed Arena's first director of development. Joined eight years ago by Tom DiGiovanni, director of the annual fund, they and their staff solicit contributions from corporations, foundations, government agencies, and individual donors to bridge the gap between earned and unearned income. In addition, they prepare grant requests and coordinate the fundraising activities of the Board of Trustees, assist with galas and benefits, and organize special events for contributors. Their fundraising endeavors account for 35% of the budget, currently a sum of \$3.2 million a year.

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#### COMMUNICATIONS

Director of Communications Regan Byrne, three-year veteran, and her staff of eight actively cultivate community interest and participation in Arena's work. The office's duties include press relations, marketing, group sales, coordination of special events, community outreach, photographic archives, and the production of all printed materials which keep the theatergoing audience of over 300,000 per season informed about the theater's activities. The total marketing effort, which promotes the excellence in artistic achievement which abounds on our stages, helps to account for the approximately \$5.5 million per year in revenue.

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#### TICKET OPERATIONS

The box office manager, two-season veteran Jena L. Hoffman, three assistant managers, and a staff of twenty provide customer service and information to the public seven days a week, ten hours a day. The main box office in the Arena is where all phone sales are made. Sam Rossi, subscriptions manager, has been at Arena for three seasons. He supervises a three-person staff that provides personalized customer service to Arena's nearly 18,000 valued subscribers who enjoy performances in all three theaters.

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#### INFORMATION SYSTEMS

A theater for today's world must provide efficient office automation. The operations manager, ten-year veteran Mark Horowitz, and the systems manager, four-year veteran Sarah Coco, monitor the pulse of the institution: Information Systems. Their office, with a full-time staff of four, purchase and maintain all computer hardware and software, write specialized programs, and further the computer literacy of all staff.

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#### HOUSE MANAGEMENT

House Manager Wayne White, aided by associate house managers and a volunteer usher staff of 1800, has looked after the comfort and safety of Arena's audiences for the past eighteen years. Aided by Handicapped Services Director Betty Siegel, a seven-year veteran, they have consistently placed Arena in the vanguard of services for disabled theatergoers by providing braille and large print programs, audio narration, listening assistive devices, and sign interpreters.

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#### MAINTENANCE

Building Manager Georg Koman, a two-year employee, supervises the security and maintenance of the building in cooperation with twenty-year veteran Clarence Henry, maintenance supervisor, and his staff.

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#### LIVING STAGE THEATRE COMPANY

Living Stage and its artistic director, Robert A. Alexander, celebrate a quarter-century anniversary this season. Arena's community outreach theater company, located at 14th and T Streets, N.W., also works with a resident acting company and their work is described at length in a separate essay. The managing director of the past nine years, Catherine Irwin, and three other staff members have offices within the Arena building where they conduct the administrative functions of Living Stage. Arena's Board of Trustees has a separate Committee on Living Stage comprised of twenty-two volunteers, members of the community devoted to promoting the singular work of this group.

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#### ALLEN LEE HUGHES FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Fellows Coordinator Willa Taylor handles the recruitment and placement of at least ten participants in the mentor-style apprenticeship program that offers personalized training to people of color in production, administration, and artistic positions. A fuller description of this program, named in honor of Associate Artist Allen Lee Hughes, is detailed in the "Cultural Diversity" essay.

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#### STUDENT MATINEE SERIES

Through the combined efforts of the literary, communications and group sales offices, school groups come to see matinee performances of several shows throughout the season. After the performance a member of the literary staff joins the acting company in conducting, over the course of the season, at least twenty-five discussion sessions with students. These sessions continue to serve as an effective means of developing young audiences.

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#### VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are a major contribution to the workforce of Arena. For forty years their uninterrupted contribution has been the mainstay of a number of regular functions of the theater's operations; guiding tours, hosting opening night parties, ushering, coordinating large mailings, and offering always-needed and ever-appreciated office assistance.

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#### INTERNSHIPS

Since its inception Arena has offered a variety of internships in artistic, administrative, and production departments. Some interns work the length of one show or a semester, others a full season, and summer internships are also available with Arena or Living Stage. These positions offer an invaluable hands-on experience in the daily functions of the professional theater. Seven current department heads, as well as the future artistic director, Douglas C. Wager, began their theater careers as interns at Arena.

—Cynthia Burns

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Top: Arena associate artist and lighting designer Nancy Schertler and her assistant Lorrie Ledesma discuss a lighting plot during a technical rehearsal.

Second from top: All ticket operations are handled by an in-house Box Office and Subscriptions staff. At center, Arleen Mindis takes a phone order from a patron.

Second from bottom: Living Stage's 1990-91 company includes Oran Sandel, Scott Fortune, Director Robert Alexander, Halima Williams, Kathryn Hunter, and Music Director Rory Chalcraft.

Bottom: Actress Tana Hicken (center) at a post-performance discussion of *Junio and the Peacock*.

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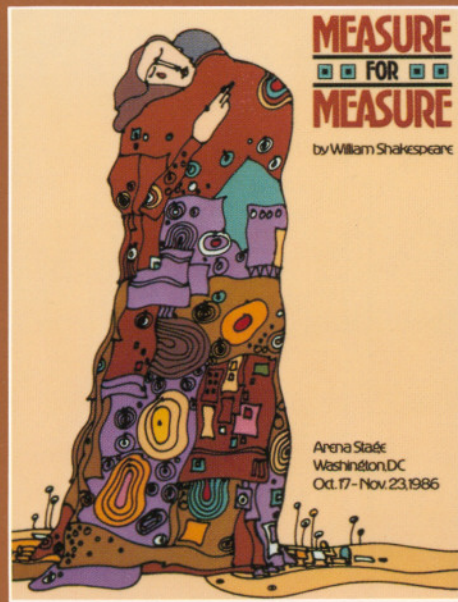
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Edited and written by Laurence Maslon

This 108-page volume chronicles the history of one of America's most influential resident theaters. Illustrated with over 200 photographs, the book traces Arena Stage's forty years season by season, with twenty-one essays on the theater's national and international achievements.

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